THE ART OF

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THE LOST CREATURES OF Z

ON THE TRACK OF COLONEL FAWCETT'S AMAZON MYSTERY BEASTS

TERROR IN THE SKIES

INDIA'S GREAT DRONE PANIC

BEYOND THE OUTSIDER

THE WORLD OF COLIN WILSON

SNAKES & ORACLES

MY BIG FAT GREEK DREAM ADVENTURE

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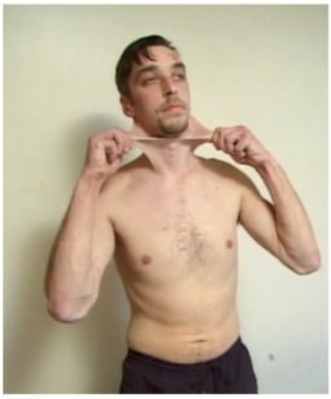
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COLONEL FAWCETT'S TOP TEN MYSTERY BEASTS

One hundred years after the disappearance of Colonel Percy Fawcett in Brazil, **KARL SHUKER** follows in the lost explorer's footsteps, seeking possible identities for the cryptozoological creatures Fawcett described... and sometimes even claimed to have encountered.

34 MY BIG FAT GREEK DREAM ADVENTURE

The Ancient Greeks, when feeling a bit off-colour, would often repair to sacred centres where they would seek to induce dreams of the healing gods Asclepius and Amphiaraus. Intrepid oneironaut **GARY LACHMAN** decided to retrace their steps on a modern-day "dream oracle retreat".

40 THE MAN WHO INVENTED LUCID DREAMING

PHIL BAKER reassesses the work of the Marquis d'Hervey de Saint-Denys, whose pioneering approach to his dream life resulted in the first book to explore the human ability to shape and direct our own dreams.

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The late 1990s saw a television version of *FT* in which Rev Lionel Fanthorpe presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". In 1998, Father Lionel was back with an X-rated spin-off called *Fortean TV Uncut*. Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he faces the dark side of forteana...

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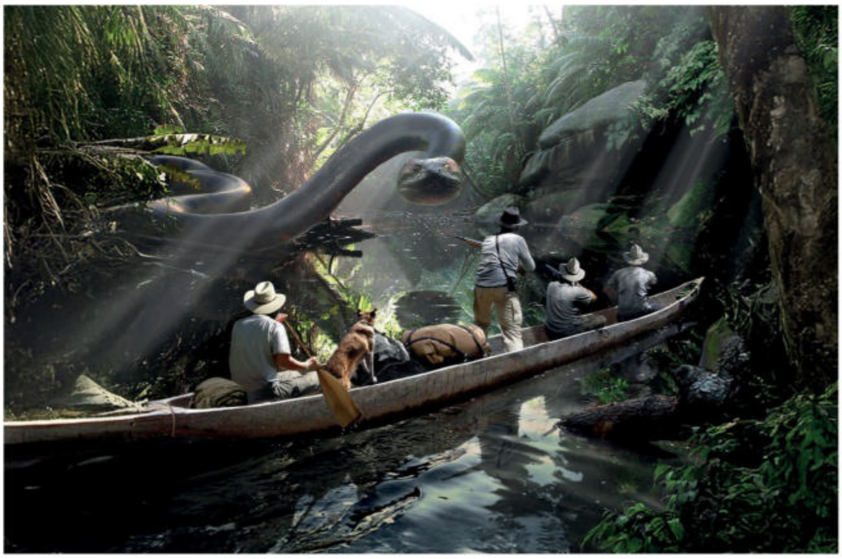
EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



CHRISTOPHER SMITH

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME?

As the autumn mists descend and the nights draw in, what better time to take to your bed, curl up with a copy of *FT* and enjoy a good night's dreaming? Phil Baker (p.40) explores the world of night-time reveries with Hervey de Saint-Denys, the aristocratic French pioneer of lucid dreaming – the idea that it's possible for dreamers to take control of and guide their dreams. Meanwhile, fellow oneironaut Gary Lachman tells us what he did on his holidays: rather than lounging by the pool, he embarked on a 'dream oracle retreat', visiting some of the most notable dream incubation sites of ancient Greece, sacred healing centres where visitors sought to induce dreams of the healing gods (p.34). Snakes, strangely enough, played a major part, from the sacred serpents of Asclepius to the Pythoness of Delphi; and snakes (of the unnaturally large variety) feature elsewhere in this issue. Our cover shows the encounter recorded by explorer Col Percy Fawcett, who disappeared 100 years ago, with an outsize anaconda, and Karl Shuker investigates this and the many other cryptids described by Fawcett as populating the "poisoned hell" of the Amazon (p.28). Darren Naish, though, says we shouldn't get too carried away by tales of impossibly large snakes, and offers a sceptical survey of the subject (p.52). All this plus the latest news of the weird, from Indian drone panics to saintly relic thefts…

NEW FT SPECIAL EDITION

As we go to press, Hallowe'en is imminent, and we'd like to take the opportunity to recommend our latest FT special edition – *Witches & Witchcraft: Stories of Sorcery, Spells and Superstition* – which provides perfect reading material for the spooky season. Bringing together long-out-of-print articles from the FT archive, this collection explores the history and folklore of witchcraft, covering mediæval beliefs about witches' night flights to the Sabbath, witchfinders and witch-hunts in 17th century England, and the twilight of witch belief in the Victorian era and beyond, as well as related topics such as apotropaic marks and witch bottles, witches on screen from silent cinema to children's television, and the relationship between folklore and femininity. It comes with a thoughtful introduction and brand new commentary and analysis from bestselling author, historian of witchcraft and occasional FT contributor Malcolm Gaskill. A perfect gift for yourself, family, friends and any aspiring young witches and warlocks in your life. You can find a copy at your local newsagent or order direct from the FT shop: https://shop.forteantimes.com/products/books

ERRATA

FT458:4. In our report on the death of Pope Francis we mistakenly referred to him as 'Francis II'. Ian Brown emailed to point out that Francis had no ordinal, being the first Pope of that name.

COVER ILLUSTRATION
CHRISTOPHER SMITH

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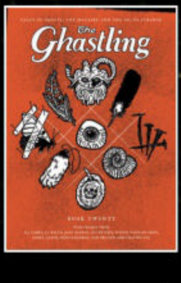

THEGHASTLING.COM

A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

SAINTS AND SINNERS

Carlos Acutis canonised, Charlie Kirk cursed, plus miracles and relic thefts

CHARLIE KIRK: CURSES AND MIRACLES

While the murder of right-wing blogger, Trump favourite and MAGA provocateur, Charlie Kirk, during a rally at Utah Valley University in Orem immediately generated a plethora of conspiracy theories (**FT463:11**), after that things only got stranger. Kirk's killer, Tyler James Robinson, was swiftly arrested, but confusion reigned about his motives, as he did not seem to have any clear political views. In an attempt to pin the murder on violent "Leftists", many on the right pointed to his alleged, but unconfirmed, relationship with his transgender (and, according to some reports, 'furry') roommate as triggering his actions. Kirk had a track record of inflammatory rhetoric against the trans community, and in a text message to his roommate following the murder, Robinson wrote: "I had enough of his hatred. Some hate can't be negotiated out." Conversely, others have pointed to Robinson's use of memes relating to followers of an even more extreme right winger, Nick Fuentes, to suggest the shooting was part of a right wing "gang war" between his faction and Kirk's "Turning Point". Known as "Groypers", Fuente's followers believed that despite his extreme views, Kirk was insufficiently radical and was diluting the MAGA message.

ZUMA PRESS, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: A makeshift memorial to Kirk outside Timpanogos Regional Hospital in Orem, Utah, following his murder.

One Etsy witch burned a photo of Charlie Kirk in order to curse him

However, a further possibility has also been suggested; that Robinson was the unwitting agent of a curse placed on Kirk by witches. On 8 September, two days before Kirk was shot, the feminist website *Jezebel* published an article entitled "We Paid Some Etsy Witches to Curse Charlie Kirk". This described the anonymous author's efforts to commission modern witches to cast spells on Kirk via the online craft marketplace Etsy. In all, they bought three spells; two were entitled "POWERFUL HEX SPELL" and "MAKE EVERYONE HATE HIM", neither of which offered serious consequences, while one Etsy witch, Priestess Lillin, burned a photo of Kirk in order to curse him. The spells were intended to inflict Kirk with minor inconveniences such as "an inexplicable zit, malfunctioning broadcasting equipment and ill-fitting apparel", rather than to have any serious consequences, with the author saying that "to ruin his day with the collective feminist power of the Etsy coven would be my life's greatest joy." The article was largely unremarked on until Kirk was murdered, when it was picked up by the media and the anonymous author accused of causing Kirk's death.

Celeste Mott, a witch who had not been involved in the hexing, said, though, that it was "unusual" for a curse to work in just two days, while other commenters said that while the individual spells used on Kirk might have been trivial, casting three at the same time might have been "overkill", which inadvertently triggered his murder. Another magical adept blamed the time of year, saying: "Magic during eclipse season uses chaotic energy and activates in unexpected ways. This is why I don't practice or manifest until both eclipses are over." *Jezebel* publisher Josh Jackson, though, emphasised that the article was satire and said: "The article was a tongue-in-cheek exploration of people selling hexes on Etsy, and intended as a satirical response to Charlie Kirk's rhetoric over the years. The writer was very clear that she didn't want real harm to come to Kirk." This is all, of course, highly reminiscent of similar attempts by US witches to put a "mass binding spell" on Donald Trump in 2017 during his first presidency (see **FT359:2**).

In the days following Kirk's murder, there was a wave of mourning across the US, seemingly out of all proportion to Kirk's previous public standing, and a concerted effort to paint him as a saintly martyr. This largely involved emphasising his religious convictions (dismissed by his critics as performative religiosity) and ability to bring young people together, while avoiding mentioning Kirk's precise beliefs and often controversial public statements.

A "final miracle" was also attributed to Kirk. He had been shot in the throat with a powerful hunting rifle, but, according to Turning Point USA spokesperson Andrew Kolvet, there was no exit wound, so that the bullet had been prevented from travelling onwards and killing anyone else. Kolvert said that he'd spoken to the surgeon who tried to save Kirk and they had told him that the bullet "absolutely should have gone through, which is very, very normal for a high powered, high velocity round," adding, "His bone was so healthy and the density was so, so impressive that he's like the man of steel." This led Kolvert to say that "Even in

FEAR FROM THE SKIES

Drone panics spread from India to Europe

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FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

Celebrating the work of Colin Wilson

PAGE 14

SAUCERS OF THE DAMNED

Weird spheres and flat-pack aliens

PAGE 26

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A woman holds aloft a picture of Carlos Acutis at his Canonisation ceremony in St Peter's Square at The Vatican on 7 September. **BELOW**: The relic stolen from the Santa Domingo de Guzmán church in Mérida, Venezuela, on 9 September.

death, Charlie managed to save the lives of those around him. Remarkable. Miraculous.” Others have argued that at the distance from which Kirk was shot, the velocity of the bullet would have been reduced sufficiently for this not to be exceptional. Subsequently, the Catholic Bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, Robert Barron, called Kirk “a kind of apostle of civil discourse” and suggested he was a Christ-like figure, while Cardinal Dolan of New York described him as a “modern-day St Paul”. While Pope Leo said he would pray for Kirk and his family, he followed this by urging people to “refrain from rhetoric and instrumentalisation that lead to polarisation rather than dialogue.” *themarysue.com, 11 Sept; dailymail.co.uk, 21 Sept; ncronline.org, 18 Sept; americamagazine.org, 23 Sept 2025.*

MILLENNIAL SAINT RELIC THEFT

The canonisation of Carlos Acutis, the English-born Catholic teenager dubbed “the first millennial saint” (**FT451:22**) and “God’s influencer”, finally took place on 7 September after a delay caused by the death of Pope Francis. However, two days after he became a saint, someone stole one of Acutis’s relics from a church in Venezuela. The small circular piece of cloth, from an item once worn by Acutis, was on display in the Santo Domingo de Guzmán parish church in Mérida, housed in a glass reliquary. It was classed as a “third-degree relic,” an object that had been touched by the saint and had been loaned by the Vatican to a local youth group that venerated Acutis when he was beatified – the last step before being declared a saint – in 2020. No one seems to have any idea quite how the theft took place or who might be responsible, and the police have no leads. Adrián García, coordinator of the San Carlo Acutis Youth Group, said: “So far, there’s no information; it’s still missing. We have faith in God that it will appear. It has great spiritual value.” Other relics of Acutis are on display at the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, which has his preserved heart, and in the Church of San Francis in Rabat, on the island of Gozo, Malta, where there is a lock of his hair. Other locks of hair – relics “Ex Capilis” – can be found at the sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie in Alife, Italy, at the Parish of San Tommaso Apostolo in Rome, and in several other places, including the Church of Our Lady of Dolours in London, where Acutis was baptised. Alleged locks of Acutis’s hair have also been sold online for significant sums. This has been condemned by the Catholic Church, with the Diocese of Assisi, where Acutis is buried, involving the police to stop the online sales of Acutis relics. *[AP] 13 Sept 2025.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT’S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

DOG ‘DRUNK’ AFTER EATING DEAD CAT AS OWL ON LSD HAS BAD TRIP

D.Mirror, 20 Aug 2025.

Seaside town blames sudden ‘horrible smell’ on ‘the French’

Kent Lve, 20 July 2025

FISHERMAN WHO EXPOSED HIMSELF IN NORTHERN IRELAND TESCO BLAMES LANGUAGE MIX-UP DURING SAUSAGE THEFT INTERVIEW

Sunday Life, 29 July 2025.

Huge wife breaks out at Edinburgh’s Arthur’s Seat’

Sky News, 11 Aug 2025

SIDELINES

MOOOOVED

North Yorkshire police have appealed for information about the disappearance of a life-size sculpture of a cow from a field at Kirby Overblow near Harrogate. The cow vanished sometime between 14 and 28 January, but no one saw it being stolen, which has left the police baffled. The animal was made of solid, dense, plastic and had required the use of a heavy duty forklift to install it, making it exceptionally difficult to spirit away without someone noticing. *The Gazette (Yorkshire), 15 Feb 2025..*

FLORIDA WOMAN

Police in St Petersburg, Florida, were called to a convenience store after reports of a drunk, naked woman running amok there. Celia Barrett, 35, was found brandishing a potato peeler aggressively at staff after knocking over a Red Bull display, having also destroyed a carton of cigarettes, and was arrested after "inappropriately touching herself inside the gas station". *fox35orlando.com, 30 Jan 2024.*

P-P-P-PICKUP A PENGUIN

Penguins, it seems, really aren't suited to flying. After completing a survey of Bird Island, in South Africa's East Cape province, a helicopter pilot was asked to ferry a biologist and a penguin back to Port Elizabeth. The helicopter was only about 15m (50ft) above ground when the bird's movements caused the cardboard box it was in to slide off the researcher's lap and hit the controls, causing the helicopter to lurch violently sideways. The main rotor blades struck the ground, and the aircraft crashed about 20m (66ft) from its take-off point. The helicopter was seriously damaged, but the pilot, passengers and penguin were unharmed. *BBC News, 10 Apr 2025*

MARTIN ROSS

IG NOBELS 2025

Another round of improbable research features drunken bats and stripy cows

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The Ig Nobel Prize for aviation is accepted by Francisco Sanchez for studying whether ingesting alcohol can impair bats' ability to fly

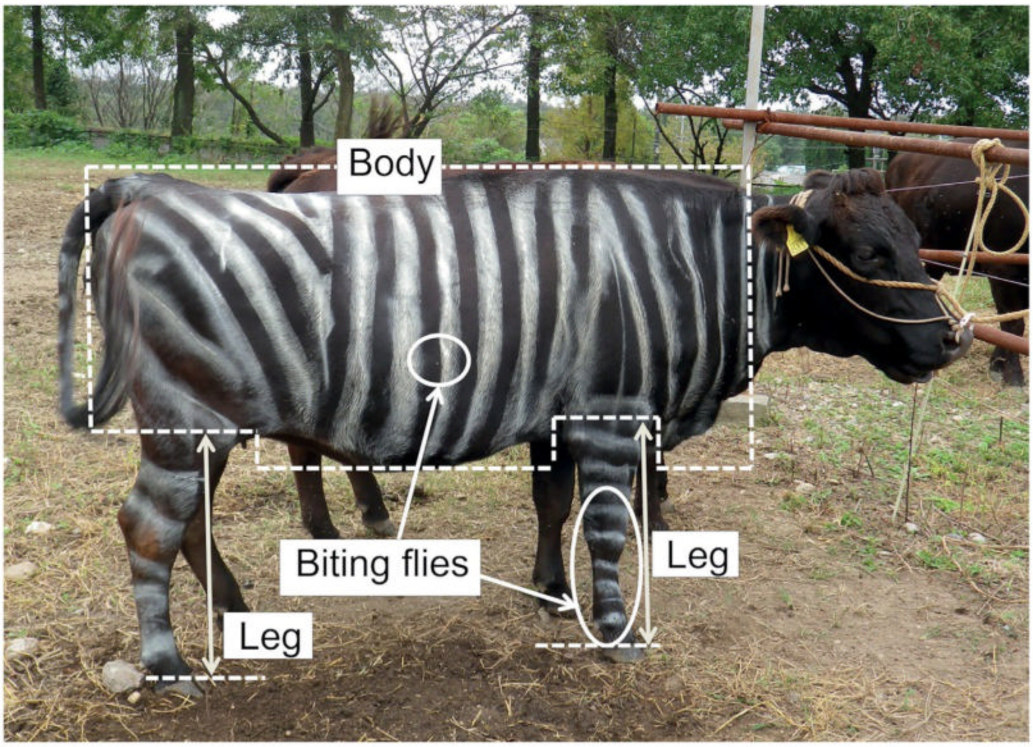
Reliably, every September, just before the Swedish Academy announces the Nobel Prizes, *The Annals of Improbable Research* awards its Ig Nobel Prizes, for "achievements that first make people laugh and then make them think", with winners getting their prizes from real Nobel laureates at a ceremony in Boston where they are pelted with paper planes and told to "be quiet" by a loud eight-year-old girl if their speeches overrun. As ever, the list contained some truly eye-popping research.

Most media attention has been focused on the winners of the Chemistry Prize, Rotem and David Naftalovich, who hit upon a wheeze to solve the obesity crisis – adding Teflon to dieters' food. They worked out that food could contain up to 25 per cent of the non-stick substance before it affected the taste or texture, satisfying hunger without being absorbed by the body and sliding harmlessly out afterwards. Rotem tested this on himself with Teflon chocolate bars, and came to no harm, but the US Food and Drug Administration did not take the proposal seriously. "I don't think they wanted to review it because it was such a wonky idea," Naftalovich said.

Rainbow lizards from Togo are particular about the pizza they eat

The Peace Prize was nabbed by a team that included Dr Fritz Renner from the University of Freiburg and Prof Matt Field of the University of Sheffield, who found that a shot of vodka made people better at speaking foreign languages. "A small sip seemed to boost confidence without making the words fall apart," Renner said, while Field pointed out that the actual difference wasn't huge, saying, "It's not like people were transformed into perfect Dutch speakers after a single drink." On the other hand, booze was found to be a big problem for fruit bats by Francisco Sánchez and colleagues. After dosing Egyptian fruit bats with ethanol, they found the animals flew more slowly and their echolocation became more erratic, much as humans slur when drunk, leading them to conclude that the bats' habit of bingeing on fermented fruit leaves them "at higher risk of colliding with obstacles".

The prizes this year seemed to have a distinctly culinary bent, with the Pædiatric Award going to Julie Mennella and Gary Beauchamp. They explored the impact of maternal diet on breast milk flavour and found that babies suckled for longer after their mothers ate garlic, and an Italian team under Giacomo Bartolucci won the Physics Prize with a paper pinpointing a phase transition in the traditional pasta dish *cacio e pepe*. This leads to unpleasant clumping that makes the dish tricky to get right, as it gives it a stringy texture instead of a smooth, creamy one, but they came up with a solution, suggesting cornflour is added to the mix to provide starch rather than just relying on starch in the pasta water. Continuing the theme, an international team from Nigeria, Togo, Italy and France got the Nutrition Prize for discovering that rainbow lizards from Togo are very particular about the pizza they eat, choosing the



OISHI, KOJIMA & SATO

ABOVE AND BELOW: Kazato Oishi, Tomoki Kojima and Sei Sato won the Ig Nobel prize in biology. Their experiment showing that painting zebra-like stripes on cattle significantly reduces the number of biting flies landing on them.

NEWSCOM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

"four cheeses" pizzas consistently and ignoring ones with any other topping. Still peripherally relating to food was the paper that won the Biology Prize, published by Dr Tomoki Kojima at the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization in Japan, which detailed his team's work that showed cows suffered fewer bites from flies when they were painted with black stripes. "I couldn't believe it… I thought I was dreaming," Kojima said. He had been inspired by discovering that zebras are largely left alone by flies, and wondered if this was down to their stripes, and if so, could this be used to defend cows against insects, as fly bites have a serious impact on cattle, reducing their productivity considerably.

Not related to food, unless he bit his nails, was the Literature Prize, given posthumously to Dr William Bean of the University of Iowa for a sequence of papers that documented in granular detail the growth rate of his fingernails and toenails over 35 years. Bean won the prize for the literary flair he brought to his reports, which included phrases such as "the nail provides a slowly moving keratin kymograph that measures age on the inexorable abscissa of time" and "the teeming mass of hope and pain, technical virtuosity, and depersonalization called a 'health center'", as well as references to mediæval astrology, James Boswell, and *Moby Dick*. "He would have loved this and used it as an event to write some perfect acceptance speech," said Bean's son Bennet. "He would say: 'Finally, recognition!'"

The Psychology Prize went to Marcin Zajenkowski and Gilles Gignac, who investigated what happens when you tell narcissists that they are intelligent – they found it makes them more prone to bragging – and the Engineering Prize was bestowed upon Vikash Kumar and Sarthak Mittal, who created a shoe rack that neutralised the stench of smelly trainers. It used an intense UV light to exterminate the odour-causing bacteria *Kytococcus sedentarius* in minutes, but also, sadly, set fire to the footwear. *improbable.com/ig/winners/#ig2025; theguardian.com; arstechnica.com, 18 Sept 2025.*

SIDELINES

IM-POO-SIBLE

Every January, North Korean Dictator Kim Jong Un sets a quota for human fæces to be collected from each citizen for use as fertiliser. Due to a shortage of other fertiliser, this year's quota has been set "impossibly high" with every adult required to deliver 500kg (1102lb) of poo, and every child 200kg (440lb), or risk being sent to a labour camp. This, however, is a lot higher than the 145kg (320lb) of fæces an average adult produces in a year and, as a result, fæces theft has become rife, sometimes leading to violence. In Usan County, two men armed with axes and shovels fought over poo from an outhouse, with both receiving serious injuries. *D.Star, 24 Jan 2025.*

SNAKES ON A PLANE!

An Easyjet flight from Gatwick airport in the UK to Marrakech in Morocco had to make an unscheduled landing in Faro in Portugal because a passenger, who was wearing a snake-print T-shirt and is thought to have been under the influence of drugs, saw the snakes slither off his shirt and move round the cabin, causing him to shout "Snakes on a plane! We need to land!" and become agitated and threatening. Meanwhile, in the US, a plane from Denver to Edmonton, Canada, had to make an emergency landing after a rabbit got sucked into an engine on take-off, causing it to fail in an eruption of flame. *dailymail.co.uk, 21 Apr; standard.co.uk, 17 Apr 2025.*

THE BUILDING HAS LEFT ELVIS

Lisa Findley, from Missouri, used a variety of aliases to claim that Elvis Presley's late daughter, Lisa Marie, had borrowed $3.8m from a fictitious company she claimed to own, with Elvis's Graceland home as collateral. Findley, 53, alleged Lisa Marie had defaulted on the loan and so she was now claiming the property, going as far as publishing a foreclosure notice in a Memphis newspaper, announcing Graceland's auction. The Presley family took legal action, which revealed that the company didn't exist, all the supposed staff were, in fact, Findley, the loan documents were fraudulent, and Lisa Marie's signature had been faked. Findley now faces a potential 20 year prison sentence. *<i> 17 Aug 2024.*

SIDELINES...

MINE-OR MISTAKE

Polish General Artur Kepczynski lost his job after soldiers under his command mislaid 240 landmines. The five soldiers responsible loaded the consignment of explosives onto the wrong train in Hajnowka, Poland, and face jail for dereliction of duty. The landmines eventually turned up when they were delivered to an IKEA warehouse in error. IKEA returned them to the military. *Metro, 13 Jan 2025.*

HEIGHT OF STUPIDITY

On 22 April, while hiking on the Fujinomiya trail on Mt Fuji in Japan, about 10,000ft (3,000m) above sea level, a 27-year-old Chinese student collapsed with altitude sickness and had to be rescued by emergency services. Four days later he had to be rescued from the trail for a second time, once more suffering from altitude sickness, having gone back to find his phone and other belongings left behind during his first rescue. It is not clear whether he succeeded in retrieving them. *xatakaon.com, 29 April 2025.*

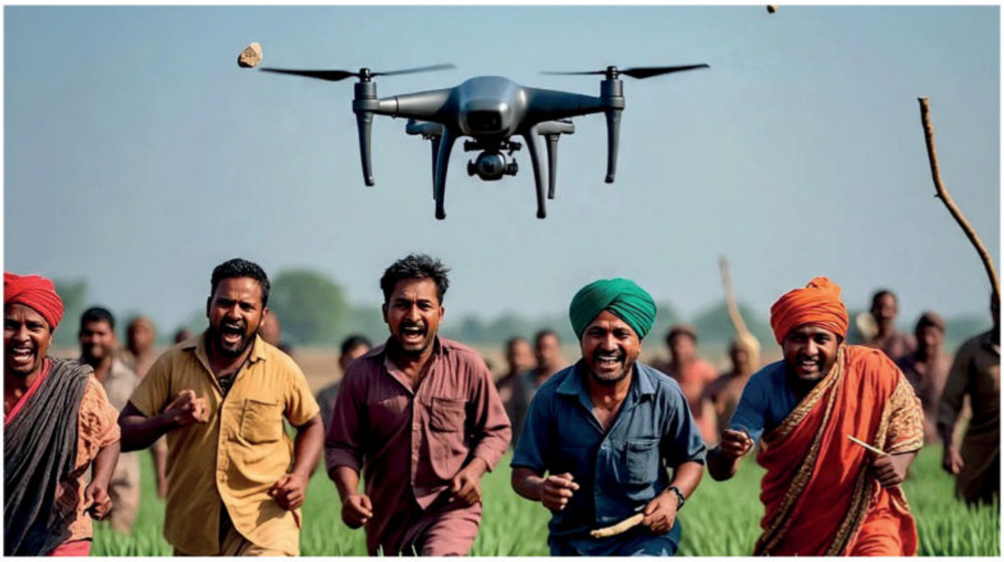
BAYEUX DING-DONG

Historian George Garnett caused a worldwide stir in 2019 when he announced that he had counted 93 penises embroidered into the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the Norman conquest of England and was made shortly afterwards. 88 of the penises belong to horses and five to humans (**FT375:10**). Now though, tapestry scholar Dr Christopher Monk has claimed there is a 94th, dangling beneath the tunic of a running man in its border, saying, "I am in no doubt that the appendage is a depiction of male genitalia. The detail is surprisingly anatomically fulsome," but Garnett disputes this, claiming it is a dagger scabbard and not a penis. *theguardian.com, 25 Apr 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

DRONE MADNESS!

Panics from India to Europe speak of anxiety and political tensions



ABOVE: An amusingly fanciful AI rendition of events in Uttar Pradesh appeared in the Indian media, but the escalating panic over 'drone-chors' has claimed at least one life.

'DRONE-CHORS'

The state of Uttar Pradesh in India is currently in the grip of a "Drone-chors" (drone thieves) panic, in which villagers believe that they are being targeted by gangs of thieves who are either invisible, or are dressed in underwear and smeared in oil (as in Malaysia's 'Greasy Men' panics; see **FT287:12-15**), and who use drones to identify and mark houses to rob. In addition, there are also rumours that there is a "nude gang" operating in the state – naked men who use drones to spot women working in the fields at dawn, so that they can chase them. The popular newspaper *Jagran* claimed that in Bulandshahr, a woman had her plait cut off during a drone-chors sighting.

In many villages, people are staying up all night, with women watching from the rooftops for drones, while the men patrol the streets below armed with lathis – heavy iron-bound bamboo sticks – axes, and sometimes guns, to catch the thieves. Police have received at least 1,300 calls about drone sightings, but have found no sign of actual drones being used to target houses, so have launched an awareness drive to try and counter the rumours. They have banned night flying by drones and set up a scheme to register all drone owners in the state, confiscating unregistered ones. Police have also threatened to prosecute people spreading "Drone-chors" rumours. A spokesperson said "I want to state very clearly: not a single case in the entire state is linked to drone theft. All such reports have turned out to be either mischievous or based on fake [sic]". Several reports of "drone theft" have been revealed as attempts to cover up robberies carried out by other means or embarrassing losses of valuable items, and a number of "drones" have turned out to be something else entirely. In Ghaziabad, a 10-year-old boy flying a kite with a LED strip for a tail caused a widespread panic, while in the village of Muaaffarnagar police arrested two men who were found to be carrying "two pigeons, a cage, and red and green LED lights... They confessed to tying the lights to the pigeons' legs and releasing them at night so that the people assumed that they were seeing drones from a distance".

> *"It's now about eating pasta in the wilderness, Kubala, Kubala"*

The rumours are being fanned to a significant extent by social media postings of indistinct, grainy videos of alleged drones and shadowy "thieves", with the result that in Raebareli someone described as "a mentally unstable youth" was beaten to death by villagers who suspected he was part of a "Drone-chors" gang; at least 10 other people have also been badly beaten by vigilantes hunting drone thieves. Local news outlet News18 has noted that the fear of "drone-chors" fits into a long history of panics in Uttar Pradesh. These include the "Monkey Man" of 2001, a half-man, half-monkey creature with metal claws and glowing eyes that was supposed to attack people at night (**FT148:8-9, 149:7**); the "Muhnochwa" scare of 2002 in which people claimed that a flying creature with flashing red and blue eyes was, again, attacking people at night (**FT163:7, 164:6-7**); and the "Choti Katwa" hair snipping panic of 2017 (**FT358:6-7**). Uttar Pradesh politician Sulkhan Singh said: "This isn't new. Uttar Pradesh has a long history of rumour-driven panic. People link any unfamiliar sight, a light, a sound, a face, with superstition. The drone scare is a modern version of that same old psychology." *theprint.in, 21 Aug; hindustantimes.com, 4+7 Oct; indiaexpress.com, news18.com, 7 Oct 2025.*

RUSSIAN DRONES?

On 9 September Poland experienced an incursion by 23 drones, which were swiftly identified as Russian and shot down. Shortly afterwards, a Russian drone strayed into Lithuania and crashed, and another violated Romanian airspace and was tracked by radar until it left. Following these encounters with clearly identified Russian drones, more were reported near airports, military installations and critical infrastructure right across Europe. Denmark reported a drone incursion from 22 to 25 September, with drone reports temporarily closing Copenhagen Airport and four smaller Danish airports; drones reportedly appeared over several major Danish military facilities as well. On 22 October Oslo airport in Norway was disrupted by reports of drones in the area, and in France they were allegedly buzzing the Mourmelon-le-Grand military base. Authorities there did not identify the craft but said they were "not small drones" of the commercial type. In Sweden, residents repeatedly reported suspicious drones over the east of the country, and in late September, Munich airport in Germany was closed twice in 24 hours following claims that drones had been seen over its runways, stranding 6,500 passengers for hours. In the days before this, drones were seen over Frankfurt Airport, an ammunition depot in northern Germany and above a base of the German Federal Police's airborne unit near Gifhorn. A power plant, oil refinery, hospital, arms factory and shipyard in Kiel, northern Germany, reported drones too, as did a military base in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Two major energy plants near Auvere and Narva, in Estonia, close to the Russian border, have also had persistent drone overflights, coinciding with work to link their electricity grids with Europe rather than Russia.

In contrast to the drones that entered Poland, Lithuania and Romania, the Scandinavian incursions and those further west in Europe proved much harder to pin down. None were filmed, tracked by radar, or intercepted by military aircraft, proving as frustratingly elusive as those that have been persistently bothering US military facilities. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen called the events "the most serious attack on Danish critical infrastructure to date" and banned all civilian drone flights for a time, and the Danish Defence Intelligence Service accused Russia of carrying out "hybrid warfare", a combination of political, economic, information and military means "to undermine a state while remaining below the threshold of armed conflict". Defence ministers from 10 EU countries responded to the sightings by agreeing to create a "drone wall" across the continent, although no one seems to be clear what this actually means – "It's not going to look like a wall, that's for sure," said Robert Tollast from the Royal United Services Institute in London – while NATO has promised "enhanced vigilance" across the Baltic. Dr Beryl Pong, who leads the Centre for Drones and Culture project at the University of Cambridge said: "We don't yet know whether it is Russia, we have feelings it is, but there is still this plausible deniability… you don't know what its motivations are… I think the incursions are a way to spook and to provoke."

There are significant problems with attributing these drone sightings to Russia; primarily that the majority of them involved large drones under close control, operating for significant amounts of time a long way from Russian territory, particularly those in France, with operators that could not be found and signals that couldn't be jammed. Despite the furious pace of development in the field driven by the Ukraine war, this is still believed to be beyond current technological capabilities. There are suspicions that Russian ships belonging to their "shadow fleet" of covertly operated sanctions-busting oil tankers might be involved in launching drones closer to these European locations; however, when French authorities detained one named the Boracay, they failed to find any evidence of drone launches and had to content themselves with charging the crew with various technical violations of maritime law.

Dr Robert Bartholomew, from the University of Auckland, Australia, probably the world's leading authority on social panics, suspects that most of these reports do not involve real drones, saying: "It has been said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes – and what we are currently seeing over northern Europe is the rhyming of history. There is a long history of UFO scares over this region where the culprit was believed to have been either Russia or the former Soviet Union." He points out that there was a "ghost planes" panic in eastern Europe in the 1930s, thought to be Soviet aircraft scoping out an invasion, and says that "Many of these reports correspond with known astronomical objects like Venus low in the horizon, no aircraft of the time could have remained aloft for the periods that it was often observed". After the war, the same area experienced similar "ghost rockets" and the 1970s and 1980s saw reports of unidentified submerged objects thought to have been Soviet submarines.

"However," Bartholomew notes, these "were omnipresent and the vast majority could not possibly have been Soviet subs – there were just too many reports; people were seeing them everywhere." He believes that current political tensions have created similar conditions, ripe for imagining intruders from the east, saying: "What we are seeing is a collective anxiety attack where the sky has become a social barometer of the times, driven by the fallibility of human perception and fear." Meanwhile, asked by a joking Russian TV interviewer whether he was really sending drones over Denmark, Russian president Vladimir Putin laughed and said "I won't do it any more." *aa.com.tr, 26 Sep; independent.co.uk, 30 Sept; BBC News, 29 Sept+2 Oct; npr.org, 3 Oct; theguardian.com, 5 Oct; euronews.com, 9 Oct 2025.*

SIDELINES...

CROW FAST FOOD

Andy Purvis, 62, from St Ives in Cambridgeshire, is baffled by the chicken drumsticks that are being dropped into his birdbath by crows, who leave them in the water to soften, then return to eat the meat a few hours later. The birds have been depositing the drumsticks in batches of "four or five" every day for the last two years. "At first we just thought it was people just putting the odd carcass out, but it's too much now to be just coming from family homes," said Purvis, who has appealed on social media to find the source of the crow snacks in the hope they can be persuaded to manage their food waste more responsibly. *BBC News, 30 Apr 2025.*

BAD HAIR DAYS

The September 1903 issue of *Leeds Hospital Magazine* contained a report of a patient from "a Berlin Insane Asylum", whose hair changed colour with her temperature. When she was cool and relaxed, the woman's hair was said to be light yellow, but when she became restless and excited, it would turn auburn. *Leeds Hospital Magazine, Sept 1903.*

GRAVE OFFENCE

In South Korea, a wildfire in North Gyeongsang province took 10 days to bring under control, during which it burned 48,000 acres of land, killed 30 people and destroyed the historic Goun Temple, a world heritage site built in AD 618. Police believe it was started by a 56-year-old man carrying out an ancestral rite by a family grave, during which he set fire to some branches, although he denies responsibility. *BBC News, 30 Mar 2025.*

TRAIN IN VAIN

Having stepped off a high speed German train for a fag break when it briefly stopped at Ingolstadt, a 40-year-old Hungarian man, who was travelling without a ticket, failed to get back on before it pulled out. Unwilling to abandon his luggage, the fare dodger jumped onto the outside of the train and clung onto a bracket between carriages as it hurtled towards Nuremberg at 175mph (282kmh). He managed to hang on for 19 miles before he was spotted. Police stopped the train, and finding the man "amazingly unharmed", charged him with fare evasion and "an act disruptive to operations". *Independent.co.uk, 20 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES...

IT'S YOUR FUNERAL

A 51-year-old British tourist from Blackburn fell from his hotel balcony in Pattaya, Thailand, while drunk. He ended up jammed in the ceiling of an adjacent building with his legs dangling into the room below, naked and covered in excrement. Prior to his fall, the man had been making loud groaning and banging noises in his room, which was also smeared with excrement. Police said, "We have some ideas about what he was doing in the room to make it so dirty, but there was nothing illegal. It is his private life, so he will have to speak with the hotel to negotiate the bill." *mirror.co.uk, 4 Nov 2024.*

MONKEY PUZZLE

Brenda Deutsch, from Winfield, Missouri, fostered more than 200 children over many years, as well as collecting exotic animals. However, this combination of interests resulted in her arrest for neglect, child abuse and child endangerment after one of her foster children went missing and turned up in Texas. Investigators believe that Deutsch may have traded the child for a monkey. *D.Mirror, 12 Apr 2025.*

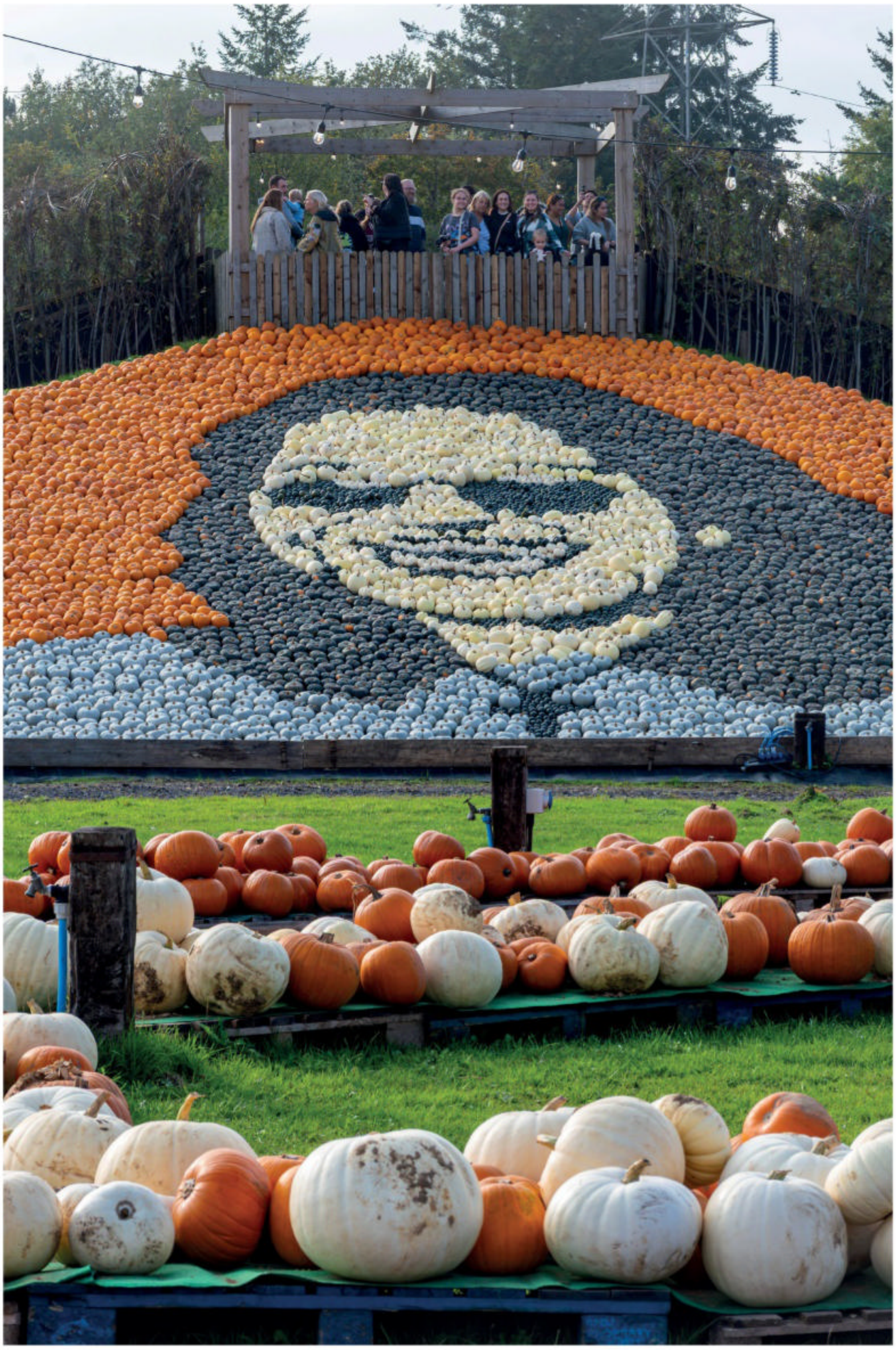
THE TEACAKE EXPLODES

Apparently, eating marshmallowy Tunnock's Teacakes on board nuclear bombers has been banned by the RAF since 1965, when a depressurisation drill resulted in an unwrapped teacake exploding, leaving sticky goo all over the cockpit. Now, tests by the RAF Centre of Aerospace Medicine have shown that while a drop in pressure will cause the marshmallow to burst through the chocolate coating, they "did not appear to explode and cause a risk to in-flight safety", and that even this could be stopped by freezing the teacakes first. Researcher Dr Oliver Bird says: "The best advice is that the snacks are kept frozen and in their foil wrappings until pilots are ready to consume them." *BBC News, 4 Apr 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

PRINCE OF PUMPKINS

Ozzy Osbourne lives again at a Hampshire farm shop!



GILLIAN PULLINGER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Sunnyfields Farm Shop near Totton, Southampton, has been holding its annual 'Pumpkin Time' festival. Standing out as a highlight of the numerous pumpkin-related activities and artworks this year was a gigantic pumpkin mosaic of Ozzy Osbourne, honouring the rock star who died in July (see **FT463:38-43**). The impressive artwork was created using more than 10,000 pumpkins and squashes and even prompted a surprise visit by Ozzy's family, Sharon, Jack and Kelly Osbourne. *Farmer's Weekly, 13 Oct 2025.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

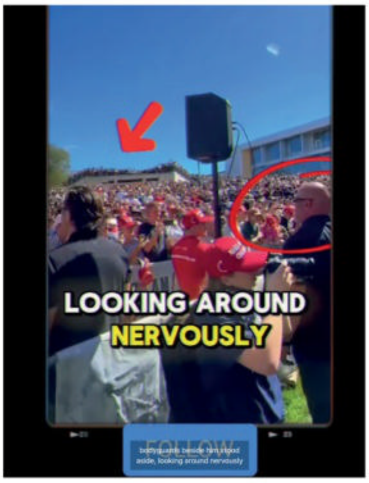
Gen Z get blamed for a lot of things, but are they dumbing down conspiracy theory too? **NOEL ROONEY** wonders whether social media posters are reducing the conspirasphere to gossip.

THE NEXT NEW THING

There is something different about the way the Charlie Kirk affair (see p.4) is playing out. At first, it followed the standard trajectory of political conspiracy theories, drawing input from both grand narrative theorists and the more immediate, automatic dissent crowd (see **FT330:5** for a discussion of this division within conspiracy theory). This was what we saw in the immediate aftermath of the shooting; the usual suspects saying the expected things and linking the incident to their ongoing concerns.

But the shooting, and the conspiracy theories that grew so quickly around it, has gained traction among a demographic that is not naturally attracted to such matters. Online, and especially on social media, the more questionable details of the incident – the magic bullet (again), the behaviour of the alleged shooter, theories that someone in Kirk's entourage actually killed him, the involvement of the Israeli state – are being endlessly hashed and thrashed about by Gen Z posters.

As far as I can tell, this interest is not being driven by political motivations, or not primarily. Rather, it has the quality of a game. Perhaps, given that social media can be understood as the most expensive toy-box in recorded history, this is not surprising. But it may have implications for the way conspiracy theory is viewed and broadcast in the future.



KPOP TIMES / FACEBOOK

These claims are explained with no reference to past events

When conspiracy theory shifted from books and small press pamphlets to the Internet, the move seemed logical and natural. The audience grew, but the basic elements of the system stayed the same: text-centred, based on research (however eccentric), and referring regularly to a canon, both of conspiracist texts and of seminal events. As the medium developed, allowing enhanced graphics and then video, the format persevered. The advent of YouTube broadened the appeal, and thus the audience; but the content creators were the same people that had written the books and pamphlets.

At the same time, as I have charted in this column over the years, the mainstream media began to take an interest in all things conspiratorial, first as a form of entertainment, later as a disreputable but necessary part of newsgathering. In response, the burgeoning army of alternative journalists began to broadcast what one might call the conspiracist version of the news. All of this changed the way that conspiracy theory was received in the mainstream – and among its traditional adherents – but it didn't immediately or radically change the nature of the content.

It did, however, change the ratios in the community. With the advent of content creators such as Alex Jones and his ilk, the traditional, grand narrative conspiracy theorists faded into the background, and the automatic dissidents took centre stage. The grand narrative didn't disappear; there was an understanding, albeit often implicit, that conspiracy had a history and was a process, but, equally, there were pressing contemporary concerns.

So what is different about this episode? Well, I was initially tempted to say that social media have no memory, no past; but the number of people who have been publicly humiliated for something they posted 10 years ago rather disproves my conjecture. On reflection, I would say that social media have no lore; partly, of course, this is because they are still relatively new, but I suspect there is a little more to it.

In more traditional cultural media, the past is a resource, and a cumulative counterbalance against our incessant craving for novelty. The past, that is to say, is always present, always alive; it forms an integral part of the picture. We measure our novelties against it. If we are conscious of it, it tempers our more superficial – and silly – innovations.

Social media appear to have no such restraints. Users are young, and belong to a demographic which many observers have dubbed post-literate; they don't read, and they don't overly respect the opinions of those who rely on written sources for verification. Expertise is valued in some circumstances (when it is immediate and hands-on), but knowledge is less important, and easily usurped by opinion.

Drop conspiracy theory into that framework and it becomes something new and different. It's fresh and develops at high speed; but it is largely unanchored by previous theories, or the canonical weight of the grand narrative. It spreads wide rather than deep. New ideas are instantly privileged.

There are influential voices in this new arena; Candace Owens and Tucker Carlson get a lot of positive mentions. And in time, some of those who have been the busiest posters may come to be well known and respected. But by and large it is a much more democratic process; new material appears every few seconds and comes from an abundance of sources.

There is a consensus of sorts – a negative one. Everything that comes from the FBI or the mainstream media is wrong. Kirk was the victim of a planned execution, but he wasn't shot by a lone sniper. Tyler Robinson is a patsy. Israel is behind the killing. All of these claims are explained visually and verbally, with no reference to past events or written records of them. Theories resonant of JFK, RFK, or MLK are offered without reference to the originals.

Nothing new is being said here, but, I suspect, it is being said in a new way; one that may just become the standard for conspiracy theory going forward, or at least the most public face of it. If this is the case, it is tempting to suggest that social media-based conspiracy theory, minus its copious lore, will turn out to be little more than gossip, replaced instantly by the next new thing. Perhaps the grand narrative will survive, but it may be relegated to the corners and shadows where it started. I'm not convinced that's a good thing.

ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING unearths some ancient psychoactive plants and finds a carved head in Orkney

BARBARA HUBER

HARMAL

New research published in *Communications Biology* has uncovered the earliest known use of the medicinal and psychoactive plant *Peganum harmala*, commonly known as Syrian rue or harmal, in fumigation practices and inhalation as smoke in Iron Age Arabia. The findings offer unprecedented insight into early Arabian therapeutic and sensorial practices, revealing that native plants were already being deliberately used for their bioactive and psychoactive properties nearly 2,700 years ago. The study applied advanced metabolic profiling techniques to analyse organic residues preserved inside Iron Age fumigation devices. The devices were excavated at the oasis settlement of Qurayyah in northwestern Saudi Arabia, a locale known in antiquity for its decorated ceramic vessels, today called Qurayyah Painted Ware.

"Our findings represent chemical evidence for the earliest known burning of harmal, not just in Arabia, but globally," says Dr Barbara Huber, lead author of the study. "Our discovery sheds light on how ancient communities drew on traditional plant knowledge and their local pharmacopeia to care for their health, purify spaces, and potentially trigger psychoactive effects."

The study employed high-performance liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometry (HPLC-MS/MS), a powerful analytical technique that enables the detection of characteristic harmala alkaloids even in tiny, degraded samples.

"The integration of biomolecular analysis with archæology has allowed us to identify not just what kind of plants people were using, but also where, how, and why," says Prof Marta Luciani, excavation director at Qurayyah and archæologist at the University of Vienna. "We're gaining access to plant-based practices that were central to daily life but are rarely preserved in the archæological record."

Known for its antibacterial, psychoactive, and therapeutic properties, *Peganum harmala* is still used in traditional medicine and household fumigation practices today in the region.

The study's implications stretch beyond archæology into fields such as ethnobotany, medical anthropology, heritage studies, and pharmacognosy – all concerned with the long-term relationship between humans, medicinal plants and natural resources. *www.gea.mpg.de/153598/earliest-use-psychoactive-medicinal-harmal-identified-iron-age-arabia*

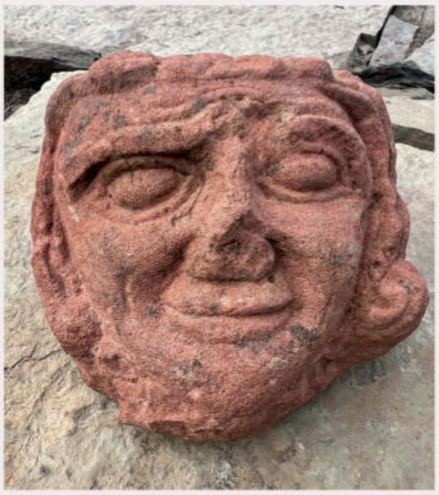
CHEWING BETEL NUTS

In south-east Asia, betel nut chewing has been practised since antiquity. The plants contain compounds that enhance the consumer's alertness, energy, euphoria, and relaxation. Although the practice is becoming less common in modern times, it has been deeply embedded in social and cultural traditions for thousands of years. Chewing betel nuts typically results in dark, reddish-brown to black-stained teeth.

Yet, teeth without staining may not mean that people didn't chew betel nuts. Now, using a new method, an international team of researchers examined ancient dental plaque from Bronze Age Thailand and found evidence of betel nut chewing. "We identified plant derivatives in dental calculus from a 4,000-year-old burial at Nong Ratchawat, Thailand," said an anthropological archæologist at Chiang Mai University in Thailand. "This is the earliest direct biomolecular evidence of betel nut use in south-east Asia." The presence of betel nut compounds in dental calculus does suggest repeated consumption, as these residues become incorporated into mineralised plaque deposits over time through regular exposure. Accordingly, the absence of tooth-staining raises questions. It could be the result of different consumption methods, the team pointed out. It could also be due to post-consumption teeth cleaning practices, or post-mortem processes affecting stain preservation over 4,000 years.

Dental calculus analysis can reveal behaviours that leave no traditional archæological traces, potentially revolutionising our understanding of ancient lifeways and human-plant relationships. It could open new windows into the deep history of human cultural practices. *phys.org, 31 July 2025.*

ADOBE STOCK



UHI ARCHAEOLOGY

ABOVE LEFT: Dried fruit of *Peganum harmala*. **ABOVE**: The Rousay carved head. **BELOW**: Betel nuts, notorious for leaving dark stains on the teeth of those who chew them.

CARVED STONE HEAD

An intricately-carved sandstone head which could be more than 900 years old has been found on the Orkney island of Rousay. The head was discovered at the Skaill Farm dig while exploring the foundations of a large wall. Dr Sarah Jane Gibbon from the UHI Archæology Institute is co-director of the dig at Skaill Farm, which is now in its 10th year. She said she was surprised at the intricacy of the carved face and hair, which looks serene despite its nose being broken off. "It looks very similar to a carved head in the south aisle of St Magnus Cathedral," she said. She added that the style of it suggested it might have had a similar function in a 12th century building. "It's really unusual; we've found nothing like this here at Skaill before," she said. "We don't know how the head ended up in the backfill of this building, though the fact the nose is broken could be a clue."

The name of Skaill farm comes from the Old Norse word "skáli", meaning "hall". The Skaill excavation site sits directly on top of what was once the Norse settlement of powerful 12th century Viking chieftain, Sigurd of Westness. Dan Lee, an archæologist with the UHI Archæology Institute, said: "Sigurd was pals with Earl Rognvald, who built St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. We think we are standing on the hall that Sigurd built and lived in, which then became a late-mediæval farmstead. Right next door we have the remains of St Mary's chapel and a mediæval tower called The Wirk. We think this was a real seat of power in that period." *BBC News, 27 July 2025.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

316: UP POMPEII – AGAIN

GOD REST FRANKIE HOWERD

Not so Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Still more not so the execrable 1959 Steve Reeves film. Best to go back in time with Peter Capaldi's *Doctor Who* visit.

(This just in: add to previous bibliography Chloé Ragazzoli (ed.), *Scribbling Through History* 2019)

As the following extracts show, Pompeian graffiti, apart from anticipating Banksy ("Imagine a city where graffiti wasn't [sic] illegal, a city where everybody could draw whatever they liked"), equally should be seen as ancient social media and trolling.

Many advertisements are in pictorial rather than verbal form, obviously for illiterates' benefit. The extent of ancient literacy is a continuing hot topic. Not for here, save to point back to the Virgilian graffiti, showing some sort of knowledge at all social levels.

As to the cognate word squares, one has always excited attention, being thought by some as evidence for a Christian presence in Pompeii; for text, discussion, and negative verdict, see Mary Beard, *TLS* 30 Nov 2012 (online).

Public ones apart, graffiti also feature inside and outside private houses. That of one Cuspius Pansa exhibits this complaint: "Nero's finance officer says the food here is poison". These visiting firemen could be a nuisance. Over at a Herculaneum house, we read "Emperor Titus's doctor Apollinaris had a good shit here." Signs urging passers-by not to urinate or defecate on doorsteps are common; judging by the parallel number of complaints, they were no deterrent – a Secundus brags he did it here three times on the same wall. Petronius's millionaire Trimalchio appointed a caretaker to safeguard his tomb against such defilements; Juvenal urged the populace to pee and crap on the statue of a Jew-born high official.

Less noxious was the anonymous person who asserts: "It took 640 steps to walk back and forth between here and there (sc. two houses) 10 times" – amateur surveyor? nutter?

Pompeii (population c. 20,000) had an active commercial district, shops commingled with houses, witness this detailed notice: "The city block of the Arrii Pollii owned by Gnæus Alleius Nigidius Mails is available to rent from 1 July [Rome's standard flitting day]. Shops on the first floor, upper-stories, luxurious flats, and a house. If interested, contact Primus, Gnæus's slave."

There was also brand-name labelling, e.g. "Finest garum from the factory of Umbricius Abascantus".

As their modern counterparts, shopkeepers were plagued by light-fingered customers: Missing: one copper pot. 65 sestertii reward for its return. 20 more for information on the thief.

Pompeii abounded in inns and taverns – need Pete Brown here. One advertised itself by name: "The Phœnix is lucky, May You Be Too." Landlords/ladies are frequently denounced for poor plonk. One had a sign telling yobs to keep their fighting outside. Two friends complain they had terrible service, so threw out the bartender and spent their money on whores. Something different went wrong at the Muleteers' Inn: "Landlord, we put our hands up to wetting the bed. Why? No chamberpot!"

Another graffito claims the booze at Nuceria is better. Maybe, maybe not. Tacitus (*Annals* 14 ch17) describes a football-like brawl between their fans and the Pompeians, moving from mutual insults to fighting, with many dead (children included) and the wounded taken to Rome – no hospital at Pompeii? As punishment, their theatre was closed for 10 years – Take note, FA...

Pompeii had a gladiator barracks. Their graffiti read like tabloid footballers, sexual bragging. One swaggers "Celadus is all the girls' heart-throb". Floronius counters with "Only six women turned up, not enough for such a stallion".

A typical fixture was advertised thus: "Aulus Certus's troupe will fight on 31 May. Plus, a hunt. Sun Awnings Provided" – Caligula used to order these removed to punish Roman crowds.

Drink, booze, and other things produced crops of inscribed curses. An especially wincing one goes: "Chie, I hope your hæmorrhoids rub together so much they hurt worse than ever before".

Municipal elections were fiercely contested – no voter apathy here – what if there'd been a Pomp-Exit referendum? Apart from many routine ones, we see "All the Late-Drinkers Demand Vatia for Ædile" and "All the Dead-Beats want Vatia" – Pompeii's Nigel Farage..? – Did Vatia win?

It's estimated over 50% of the graffiti are sexual – not to say sexist. Distinctions should be drawn. There are many poignant and tender expressions of sweethearts in love, also husbands and wives. Some are colourful: "When I see a dark girl, I'm happy to eat mulberries" – ink is spilled over this; it surely means nipples. Some girls got into traditional trouble: "I couldn't care less about your pregnancy, Salvilla" and "Atimetus got me pregnant". Sexual predators include "Secundus who buggered boys who wailed" and "Quintius has penetrated wiggling buttocks and knows how painful it is".

In general, we have a quickly wearisome catalogue of hetero- and homosexual boasting or insulting, with equal divisions between 'straight' fucking, cunniligus and fellatio.

An online list of graffiti inventories a host of Pompeian prostitutes, male and female, with their prices and specialities, fellatio being the clear punters' favourite. There were rent boys who offered to service women orally – the film *American Gigolo* comes to mind. One girl boasts of her 'astronomical price' – were there high-class Escort Services? Despite the many "I buggered..." graffiti, none of these individuals offer anal sex. No 'kinky stuff', either, on their menus, nor any glimpses of dubious massage parlours, though there must have been lots of low-jinks at the public baths...

As the old *News of the World* used to boast: All Human Life Is There – better stop this classical 'News of the Screws' before the editor does...

OUTSIDERS UNITED

ALAN MURDIE, adrift in Soho, finds food for thought at the Fourth International Colin Wilson Conference

Colin Wilson's Double Brain

COLIN STANLEY

LEFT: Gary Lachman presents a talk on Wilson's exploration of the bicameral mind. **BELOW**: Colin Wilson.

You can spot an engaged audience these days, when few, if any, are fiddling with their smart phones. This proved so with the 60 people gathering for the Fourth International Colin Wilson Conference on 7 July, a day of lectures and discussion dedicated to the life and ideas of the iconic writer Colin Wilson (1931-2013; obit **FT310:24-25**). Included were a number of topics fascinating to forteans.

The conference convened in the cavernous basement of Scarlett Green Restaurant in Noel Street, Soho; the venue was selected partly in homage to Wilson's early years as a struggling writer in 1950s Soho before his first book *The Outsider* (1956) launched him as a literary phenomenon. I felt it also served as a metaphor for many of the topics under discussion. The great theme of Wilson's writing is human potential and how we suffer from a limited outlook when it comes to appreciating the breadth of human consciousness and the latent capacities within us. It struck me that, gathered as we were below street level in rather packed conditions, we might be constrained in our immediate vision but, metaphorically, we were 'looking at the stars' both in terms of Wilson's stimulating ideas and the expert speakers illuminating them for us. Also present was Colin Wilson's son Damon, sharing further insights from direct knowledge of his father's ideas and perspectives.

The conference opened with a tribute and salute to writer Stuart Holroyd (1933-2025), a one-time compatriot of Wilson who died in February, the last survivor of the dynamic London circle in which Wilson mixed in the mid-1950s. Proceedings were then formally launched by conference organiser and master of ceremonies Colin Stanley, a Wilson scholar who has masterfully organised and steered these events since 2015.

The first presenter was artist Darren Coffield, chronicling the history of Soho's legendary Colony Room, an exclusive drinking den that once served an eclectic collection of artists, poets, beatniks, and connoisseurs of alternative living. At this notorious tavern one could literally rub shoulders with such luminaries of the day as Lucian Freud, Daniel Farson, Francis Bacon, Jeffrey Barnard, George Melly and a lively cast of Soho bohemians, eccentrics and rebels. Throughout its history the Colony Room supplied a permanent showcase of the human condition at its best and worst, with Wilson absorbing much from a relatively short exposure. It was a crowd that in varying degrees eschewed the niceties of bourgeois convention and even, on occasion, the law, while displaying a rugged independence and a strong belief in personal self-help. Here Wilson met the famed 'angry young men' of the 1950s literary scene, with whom he was, in his own mind, rather unfairly lumped. Fortunately, following the success of *The Outsider*, Wilson quit the coarse if stimulating licence of Soho, establishing himself in Cornwall thus avoiding the bellicose, pessimistic or addictive paths taken by many who remained.

> *The highest states of awareness were attained by rare personalities*

One enduring legacy that remained with him was an abiding interest in the criminal mind. Effectively a self-taught criminologist, as early as 1961 he co-wrote *The Encyclopaedia of Murder* (1961) with Patricia Pitman. Published at a time when the true crime genre was virtually non-existent, it investigated the darkest depths of the human mind, the very antithesis of the higher self celebrated in *The Outsider*. Examining this phenomenon, Lindsay Siviter, an authority on historic crime, chose the infamous Dr Crippen case as one of many Wilson examined. Crippen is a murderer whom everyone has heard about, but few can demonstrate as much knowledge of him as Lindsay. To Wilson, Crippen and similar murderers represented in a negative sense the hidden powers which lurk within an outwardly normal individual, but which are wrongly channelled into destructiveness. The details were gruesome, and Crippen's escape and capture were sensationalised, easily diverting us from examining these deeper psychological and existential issues.

Undertaking a review of the theme of different levels of the self was Chris Nelson in a paper asking, 'Are we all Multiple Personalities?' Colin Wilson initially expounded in *The Outsider* his view that the highest states of awareness were attainable by rare and creative personalities, but came to believe that this was just the tip of a metaphorical iceberg of consciousness floating upon a vast inner ocean of unconscious levels. Such 'icebergs' may at times shatter and become free-floating structures, effectively operating as independent entities inside our own heads, resulting in so-called cases of multiple personality. These may be either benign or negative in character, but certain instances of 'possession states' generate a suspicion that the mind is disturbingly porous and can become host to an external personality, in some cases discarnate, possibly even non-human.

This aspect was then taken up by Dave Moore in 'Operation Mirror Dragon: Mind Parasites, Wetiko and other energy vampires', which examined the wider social context of possession states explored by Wilson in his novel *The Mind Parasites* (1967). Partly inspired by HP Lovecraft, it imagines mankind battling with alien parasites lurking in the deepest layers of human consciousness, feeding on human life force ahead of seizing control of Earth. In First Nation mythology the Wetiko is a cannibalistic spirit or mind-virus associated with greed, selfishness and the destruction of life. Parallels may be made with the technologically rich and virtual world of the 21st century. While we are supposedly being liberated by the wonders of virtual communications, our field of attention is being manipulated and exploited by external forces ultimately curtailing our ability to think and choose for ourselves. These invisible vampires steal our most vital resource: the capacity for self-awareness. Perhaps in a 'post-truth' world, we will need recourse to myth and archetypes to comprehend our plight fully.

Following these deep intellectual dives into inner space, we gladly broke for lunch. Fortunately, we had sufficient time to settle our digestions before Cathi Unsworth's revealing lecture on 'Bella in the Wych Elm', the unsolved Midlands murder from 1941 of an unknown woman and the bizarre theories it provokes (see **FT364:34-41**). Though not mentioned directly by Wilson, the way it still resonates in folk-consciousness illustrates how emotional reactions to bizarre events affect us across time.

The Obelisk

LEFT: Cathi Unsworth explores the mystery of 'Bella in the Wych Elm'.

COLIN STANLEY

In 'Colin Wilson & JB Priestley: Brothers in Time', Anthony Peake launched a deeper examination of this resonance and Wilson's postulated 'Faculty X' (not to be confused with the 'X-factor'), "the ability to become aware of other times and places", linking both precognition and creativity. This may come in serendipitous flashes of perception or in intuitive historical insights (Anthony shared his own Mediterranean vision of a Homeric ship). Playwright and novelist Priestley similarly admitted being a "time haunted man" fascinated by how different time periods may actually interact, exploring this in his stage dramas and collecting precognitive dreams. Priestley's memoirs reveal he felt his deeper message concerning a fourth dimension failed to connect with audiences, but he shared commonalities with Wilson's thought.

An inherent problem is the limitations of both language and our philosophical vocabulary to describe subjective states and moments of mystical ecstasy. An alternate route to capturing their essence may lie in the realm of music. In a talk entitled 'How Existential Criticism saved Colin Wilson from Pierre Boulez!' David Power probed the ideas contained in a relatively little-known book, *The Brandy of the Damned* (1964/1967) containing some of Wilson's observations and cogent critiques of modern music, including that of French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, then in soaring ascendance.

A weighty analysis of philosophical ideas followed with Matthew Coniam's paper 'Colin Wilson, AJ Ayer and the Soul of British Philosophy'. This revisited the British philosophical fashion for logical positivism and Wilson's clash with its most eminent proponent, AJ Ayer. Like Wilson, Ayer achieved fame during his 20s with a first book, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) and by the 1950s was entrenched as a leading philosopher in Britain. During the period Wilson was advocating his 'new existentialism' the two men clashed intellectually, writing dismissive reviews of each other's books. This continued until Wilson ceased receiving reviewing work and his own books veered towards new horizons. Matthew proposed the philosopher Hegel might provide a bridge between their opposed mental world views.

In the final lecture Gary Lachman examined the concept of the 'Double Brain', arguing Wilson anticipated neurological findings now being recognised in the 21st century. A wide range of 20th century thinkers and mystics such as George Gurdjieff, Rudolph Steiner, Ira Einhorn and Andrija Puharich studied dual and altered forms of consciousness, all arguing higher states were achievable by concentration. Wilson intuited that such peak experiences and mystical states might in part have a physiological basis arising from the division of the brain into two hemispheres, an idea shared by Julian Jaynes. Essentially, the left brain specialises in rational, focused and logical thought while the right hemisphere encompasses creativity, concerning itself with meaning, beauty, imagination and intuitive thinking. Modern living tends towards supressing right brain awareness and the result can be depression, disillusionment and mental illness; the stimulation and co-operation of both hemispheres is necessary.

Wilson crystallised these insights in disparate writings over many years, but now they are receiving some degree of empirical validation from psychiatrist Dr Iain McGilchrist with his 2009 book *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. In the course of this, it occurred to me throughout the day that participants were experiencing a form of dual consciousness and awareness, focusing closely on the content of these stimulating papers and disregarding the ambient noises of a working restaurant drifting down to us, and ultimately finishing with a pleasant afterglow of meaning and satisfaction, indicating the right brain at work. I wonder if we remain too 'left-brained' to embrace this?

However, we're now 70 years on from *The Outsider* and a dozen years from his death, and yet Colin Wilson as a writer continues to exert an inspirational effect on many readers, myself included. Though often derided, his books argued that life has a purpose and were fundamentally optimistic in outlook, in contrast to so many of his often prejudiced critics. And in today's world, that is a message worth sustaining.

For an interview with Colin Wilson, see **FT188:40-43**.

Nothing but static

DAVID HAMBLING explores the weird world of triboelectricity

The will o' the wisp, manifesting as strange transient lights appearing over marshy ground, has long been a puzzle to scientists (see **FT370:14**). Their best guess was always that it is marsh gas which somehow gets ignited. Richard Zare and colleagues at Stanford University in California believe they have the answer: sparks of 'microlightning' generated by contact between bubbles of methane are igniting the gas. Their laboratory demonstration looks plausible and is based on a well-known but mysterious phenomenon. Welcome to the weird world or triboelectricity, better known as contact or static electricity.

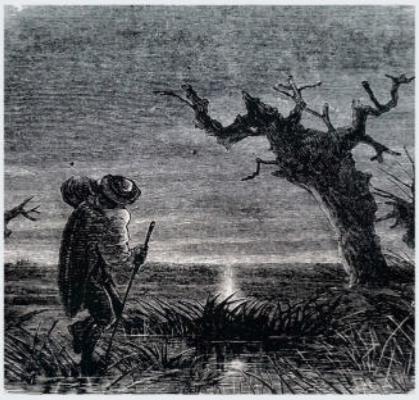
The ancient Greeks knew that rubbing two objects together could create a mysterious force and even cause sparks to fly. 'Electron' is the Greek word for amber, used after the sixth-century BC philosopher-scientist Thales of Miletus noted that after being rubbed with a cloth, amber attracted feathers. School science lessons feature similar experiments today, with pupils using plastic and glass rods to discover positive and negative charges. In a sense we have not really moved on from Miletus. We know that rubbing generates static electricity, but researchers still do not understand how the process works.

Triboelectricity appears to be the root cause of lightning. The current best theory is that a powerful draught inside a storm cloud lifts a mixture of ice crystals and soft hail known as graupel. When ice crystals strike graupel, they become positively charged and the graupel becomes negatively charged. Because the graupel is larger and denser it tends to fall carrying charge one way, and the ice crystals tend to rise carrying the opposite charge.

The top of the cloud gradually accumulates positive charge and the underside acquires an equal and opposite negative charge. Air is a good insulator, but enough charge will cause the air to break down and electric current flows between positive and negative, producing lightning and thunder.

A similar effect is responsible for spectacular blasts of lightning seen during volcanic eruptions. In this case volcanic dust becomes electrified during, it is believed, collisions and friction with ice particles. Again the powerful convective current of hot air from the volcano separates out the different-charged particles leading to large-scale charge separation and subsequent lightning.

More surprisingly though, the tribolelectric effect can also occur with particles of the same type. This sometimes occurs in sand and dust storms, which generate their electric fields and small-scale lightning. The root cause is that larger particles tend to charge positive while smaller particles tend to charge negative; nobody really knows why. Strong air currents tend to sift out the particles by size, so one charge ends up high in the air while the other stays close to the ground.



WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Bubbles could create pockets of methane lying over the water producing brief, eerie lights

This type of static can be extremely bad news for flour mills and other industrial settings with large amounts of flammable powder. Even when all other sources of combustion have been removed, the tribolelectric effect can create sparks, causing particles suspended in the air to burn explosively. Nine people were injured in 1981 by a cornflour explosion at the Bird's Custard factory in Banbury, Oxfordshire, and many similar incidents have been recorded.

The triboelectric effect is not limited to solids, and this is at the heart of the Stanford researchers' new discovery. Zare and his colleagues generated a stream of microbubbles of a methane-air mixture passing through water, and watched the results with a high-speed camera. The rising bubbles accumulated charge, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. When opposite charges met, there was a spark and a flash of 'micro-lightning' which ignited the methane-air mixture. The theory is that bubbles rising from rotting matter in a marsh could create sparks and kindle pockets of methane lying over the water, producing brief, eerie lights.

In one sense, then, triboelectricity explains all sorts of phenomena from lightning to will o'the wisps and mysteriously exploding mills. Contact electrification has been tamed and features in everyday technology like laser printers, which charge particles of toner powder so they stick to the paper and electrostatic air filters remove smoke and dust particles by charging them.

But we do not know what lies behind it. There is not even general agreement on how charge is transferred and whether the charge is carried by electrons, charged atoms, individual molecules, or larger fragments of material.

From the eighteenth century researchers have drawn up tables of 'triboelectric series' of which materials are likely to charge negative and which positive. But they have been thwarted by how unpredictable the process can be. As we have seen, something as basic as sand may be charged positive or negative by contact.

Recent work by Scott Waitukaitis and colleagues at the Institute of Science and Technology in Austria added a new twist. They believe that contact electrification is the result of several different processes happening at the same time, and is influenced by the exact smoothness of a surface on a microscopic scale. The act of charging a sample of material by rubbing it changes the sample, which is why experiments often cannot be replicated.

We know also that humidity has a huge effective on contact electrification, as anyone who walks over a nylon carpet on a dry day will discover. But we do not know why.

Static electricity in nature is especially intriguing. Some animals, notably cats, tend to build up a static charge. Is this to repel dust as some have suggested, or does it have some other function? Does the charge on birds' feathers help them navigate in the Earth's magnetic field as some researchers believe?

Zare's team also have an even bolder suggestion: that microlightning in ancient primordial soup may have triggered reactions creating the first amino acids, leading to the development of the first living cells. This is of course speculation. If it is accurate though, it means that static electricity, as well as being mysterious, is also fundamental to life on Earth.

THE BIG CAT FILES

Freedom of Information requests have led some British police forces, like the Met, to release their data on big cat sightings

ABOVE LEFT: Armed police arrive at Winnington Road, Barnet, to investigate reports of a big cat seen in a garden on 25 May 2020. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A Wildlife Officer concluded that the feline interloper, which had been photographed, was a Savannah cat, a hybrid cross breed of a serval with a domestic cat.

Freedom of Information (FOI) requests have long been used by ufologists to winkle out official reports of sightings of aerial anomalies, but they are proving to be increasingly useful when applied to other fortean phenomena. In recent years their systematic application to mystery big cats has borne interesting fruit, although it has not, perhaps, thrown as much light on the subject as might have been hoped.

Quite a few British police forces have turned down FOI requests about big cats on the grounds that compiling a response would be too expensive and time consuming, but several have made their records public. Among these were the Metropolitan Police, who have released data on sighting reports they have received since 2019, along with details of their actions and the outcome. They are a mixed bag, and none of them are exactly decisive, but several are intriguing; the earliest, from 26 July 2019, records a report of a "leopard or cheetah" seen in Hammersmith, while in Brent a few days later police noted that they had been contacted because "there is a massive black cat in Gladstone Park that chased the informant out of the park", although neither caller seems to have provided enough information for officers to feel that the reports were worth investigating. Likewise, the person who said they saw a jaguar in the garden of a house in Kensington and Chelsea in September and promised to provide images and further information, didn't, so the police did not follow up the sighting.

The source of reports of leopards, cheetahs, jaguars and similar spotted cats was perhaps revealed by an incident in Winnington Road, Barnet, on 26 May 2020; sightings of a cheetah were investigated by the Borough Wildlife Officer, who tracked the beast down and found it to be a Savannah cat crossbreed (**FT395:9**). These have spotted coats, and are a good deal larger than the usual domestic cat, but are still legal to be kept as pets; to the eye of someone unfamiliar with large felids, these could easily be taken for something more alien to the UK. In this case the wildlife officer cornered the animal, but it escaped. One can only speculate as to what was making the growling noises reported to be coming from some bushes on Hampstead Heath one evening later that month.

In Ealing, a tiger sighting turned out to be a stuffed toy, as did another tiger reported in Hammersmith in 2024. Several sightings seem to have more potential as mystery cats, such as a puma reported in Bog Gate in Richmond Park in July 2020; this prompted a police search, but nothing was found. Another large cat was reported on the Surrey border on September 2020, but without triggering any police response, while a "big cat bigger than a panther" in Bromley a couple of months later was met with similar official apathy. However, by 2021, police seem to have taken to palming off investigating sightings onto the RSPCA, with their officers being sent out to look into a large "wolf like" cat, "4-5 feet long" with "thick fur" that appeared to be stalking Twickenham, and an "animal claimed to be 100% a puma with a different shape from a cat" in Hammersmith. However, having been passed to the RSPCA, these investigations were no longer the responsibility of the police, so their outcome was not recorded.

There are, though, a few fascinating sightings; from the N2 postcode came an October 2022 report of a "large lynx-type cat, larger than normal, very sleek and with striped markings on its back" entering a house when the door was left open. Near London Zoo, in 2024, someone reported seeing two baby tigers, or possibly bears, fighting in the street in broad daylight. Elsewhere, in east London in June 2021, police received a report of two people wandering about carrying "two baby tiger (or possibly lion) cubs with black stripes but really big".

None of these reports reveal any kind of pattern of movement that might suggest the presence of an actual big cat, and there's not much consistency in what is being seen. Where there are similarities between sightings, this appears to be due to misperceptions of the rarer varieties of pet cat, such as the spotted Savannah cats and the stripy Bengals. Interestingly, only one is specifically reported to be the traditional black colour. Some are very clearly imaginative extrapolations, and it is abundantly clear that the police aren't particularly interested in cat sightings unless there is potential for harm to people, and even then they'll only take things seriously when they get multiple reports – the action taken after a lioness sighting in Bromley is recorded as: "As no further calls from other potential witnesses no action done until further calls received". In fact, the whole release radiates official indifference. Almost none of the reports resulted in police action, and the outcomes of all those that were not deemed decisively false, such as the stuffed toy sightings, are listed as "unconfirmed". It is though, very revealing as a snapshot of police attitudes to mystery animals and suggests that any undiscovered big cats in the UK are probably avoiding London. *met.police.uk/foi-ai/ request reference no: 01.FOI.25.045932.*

Written in a country churchyard

ALAN MURDIE takes a tour of some mid-Suffolk village churches in search of ghost-lore

As All Souls Day, Sunday 2 November, rolls around again, the great Christian commemoration for the departed, I recall Sir Simon Jenkins remarking in his doorstop sized guidebook *England's Thousand Best Churches* (2002): "Three ghosts inhabit all English churches. They linger in every arcade, peep from every gallery and flit across every monument. They are those of John Betjeman, Alec Clifton-Taylor and Nikolaus Pevsner. No visitor is without their companionship."

Naturally, he was using 'ghosts' as a metaphor for his distinguished forebears in the guidebook business, one he also employs in describing the architectural and artistic glories of English churches. Altogether, Sir Simon avoids discussing spiritual aspects and I don't think he believes in ghosts at all (he mentions only one, Lady Boby at Bisham Abbey, Berkshire).

For me, thoughts about the care and commemoration of souls came to mind back in July when I was tasked with organising a funeral for a friend in Suffolk. Dr Johnson famously remarked, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully," and arranging a funeral can equally achieve the same effect today. My friend's wishes were for a non-religious ceremony, certainly not one inside any church (despite him liking church architecture) since he was a professed atheist and materialist (though contradictorily maintaining that he possessed some psychic ability). My slight sense of irony was further magnified on learning his requested funeral music was "Don't Stop Believing" by the rock group Journey.

Amid this came an invitation from my fellow ghost author Robert Halliday to take a trip out to visit some villages and churches in mid-Suffolk. Our resultant meditative journey supplied a flow of reminders of how the idea of spirits and survival after death are encoded into churches and their settings. This is notwithstanding haunted churches being relatively rare in East Anglia and phantom funerals, common in Wales and western Scotland, even rarer. (I know of only three spectral funerals: near Pakenham, Suffolk, one at Quidenham in Norfolk and another on the Suffolk/Essex border around the Belchamps, which may properly belong to Essex).

CHARLES GREENHOUGH / STMARYSRICKINGHALLINFERIOR.ONESUFFOLK.NET/

ABOVE: St Mary's church, Rickinghall, with its distinctive round tower.

We took the opportunity afforded for sampling the English tradition of tea on the vicar's lawn

We set off on an overcast Saturday afternoon in July; the countryside proved strangely empty as we travelled from the A143 to our first stop at Rickinghall Superior. Here we paused, paying brief respects by the cottage ('Cambria') once owned by Basil Brown, the self-taught archæologist and discoverer of the famous Sutton Hoo ship burial. The blue plaque marking his former home served also for us as a reminder of the Spiritualist backstory to the Sutton Hoo discoveries, when landowner Edith Pretty hired Brown for excavating the tumuli, after ghostly warriors were glimpsed (see **FT390:72-75**). There is no evidence Brown embraced her Spiritualism, but he commenced two seasons of excavations into mounds, digging open the largest knoll in May 1939 and finding the treasure.Brown continued his archæology after World War II, working closer to home, investigating local churches. His final dig was near this house at Broom Hills, Rickinghall. Excavating here over four years between 1964 and 1968, he revealed a multi-period site with traces of Neolithic and Roman occupation and the later house of a Saxon noble. It also proved his last dig, for whilst excavating he suffered a stroke or a heart attack, ending his days of active archæology. An earlier generation might have said that "tampering with graves does no good".

Rickinghall Superior church has a round tower, which Robert insisted is its principal and only interesting feature. We briefly discussed comparisons between the mediæval round-towered churches of East Anglia and the mysterious round towers of Ireland, raised between the ninth and 12th centuries, often close to early monasteries. It would be fanciful but wholly erroneous to ascribe them to the influence of St Fursey, (d.650) the Irish missionary saint who arrived in Dark Age Suffolk and set up a coastal hermitage at Burgh by an abandoned Roman fort. There he experienced visions and out-of-body flights and beheld choirs of angels, departed saints and the souls of just men and the combat of evil spirits.

However, before indulging further in conjectures, we made the welcome and serendipitous discovery that a 'tea, cake and strawberries' party underway at the vicarage was being thrown open to visitors. Taking the opportunity afforded for sampling the English tradition of tea on the vicar's lawn, we were welcomed by the priest as hungry wayfarers. After enjoying some exquisite refreshment we decided not to press our ghostly mission, associations and metaphysical speculations upon the assembled party, since many of the elderly and kindly guests appeared closer to Heaven than ourselves in more ways than one. Instead, thus fortified, we headed under fitful skies eastwards to Burgate village, five miles south-west of Diss. Burgate church was selected owing to an obscure Victorian ghost story preserved in village history around 1900.

Dedicated to St Mary of Pity, Burgate church is very old. Standing within ancient earthworks and ringed by towering trees, it conveys a sensation of isolation, its detachment intensified by the corn fields stretching away to the south and rustling mesmerically in the breeze. Stepping inside the church proves an atmospheric experience; it's one of those places that gives you the feeling, as William Faulkner remarked in his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, that "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Burgate pulses with a concentrated presence, which even those devoid of natural piety can sometimes encounter. Old English country churches mostly project feelings of peace and uplift, as affirmed by astrophysicist Raynor Johnson in his book *Nurslings of Immortality* (1957) after revisiting a number of antique churches following 20 years in Australia. But occasionally, the atmosphere throbs so strongly it is unsettling, even menacing.

In *Haunted East Anglia* (1974) Joan Forman tells of a church west of Norwich, in a pretty village, where she and a friend felt an evil presence so intense her companion fled. Returning to their car, they found it covered in green blood. They were too far away from the trees for the substance to be sap and her friend began wondering about witchcraft. Unfortunately, Forman gave so few clues as to topography that any identification is pure guesswork. The story is very eerie.

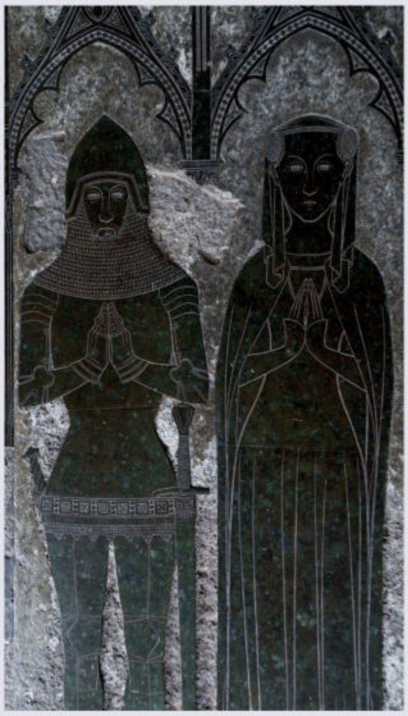
At Burgate the atmosphere is best described as 'brooding', perhaps stimulated by the decorative and devotional imagery apparent in its interior. This derives partly from an Anglo-Catholic revival just after World War I. Great War relics and shell-cases are incorporated into an almost steampunk-style public memorial to the fallen. Nearby hangs an evocative picture of an iridescent Christ that resembles Spiritualist art.

These features lay at the east end, seemingly centred about an imposing chest tomb standing before the altar and topped with what ranks as one Suffolk's three finest mediæval brasses, depicting William de Burgate (d.1409) and his wife Alianora. Though two-dimensional, one could imagine these images stirring – what a strange sight that would be, reminiscent perhaps of the nocturnal 'stick man ghosts' occasionally glimpsed on Suffolk highways.

Burgate's one ghost appeared during Victorian times to a waggoner driving his cart through the village late one night. He saw an apparition emerge from glebe land by the rectory and head out along the road opposite, turning into Sycamore Road. His horses became terrified 'all in a mucky sweat', refusing to budge as the form passed towards the church. As with dogs and cats, horses traditionally shy or freeze when apparitions materialise; we might think also of how vehicle breakdowns allegedly occur in confrontations with entities and alien craft in modern UFO lore.

This anecdote survives in a privately published book *Echoes From The Past Life of Burgate, Suffolk* (not dated, but c.1900) by local antiquary Percival Oakely Hill. My friend Dr Duncan McAndrew found and noted it for me when researching the earthworks at Burgate for his own study, *The Catalysts and Constraints of Castle-Building in Suffolk c.1066-1200*.

Oakely Hill says villagers believed the walking spirit was a former rector murdered in 1513 by a Sir William Heywerde. A similar story attaches to Offchurch, Warwickshire, where in the 1650s a man was stabbed to death in the lane outside the church. The murderer



LEFT: St Mary of Pity, Burgate. **BELOW LEFT**: The fine brass depicting William de Burgate and his wife Alianora

ALAN MURDIE

GEOPHOTOS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

THE FOUR HORSESHOES

ROB ATHERTON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Dark clouds over the Four Horseshoes pub in Thornham Magna.

ran into the church and hid in the tower, from which he later escaped and was never caught. Thereafter, the ghost of his victim was seen following the same route – walking from the lane where he had met his death, through the churchyard and into the tower (*Haunted Warwickshire*, 1981, by Meg Elizabeth Atkins).

In both Warwickshire and Suffolk, victims and perpetrators of violence, along with suicides and unbaptised babies, were at one time relegated to burial on the north side of the church, owing to a widespread superstition that it was the unlucky aspect or 'the Devil's side'. This is acknowledged in information displayed both by the pulpit at Burgate and in its churchyard, noticeably bereft of headstones on its northern side. Antiquarians once encouraged notions of pagans worshipping facing north where their gods resided, but no evidence supports this.

Finally, just before leaving Burgate, I spotted tucked in a collection of religious books *The Testament of Joad*. This is not some apocryphal gospel, but a volume by Dr CEM Joad (1891-1953), a once popular philosopher, radio personality and occasional psychical researcher who labelled his investigations 'adventures'. Joad accompanied ghost hunter Harry Price, sitting up at Borley Rectory and even spent a night with him sharing a poltergeist-haunted bed in Chiswick in 1931 (see **FT380:20**).

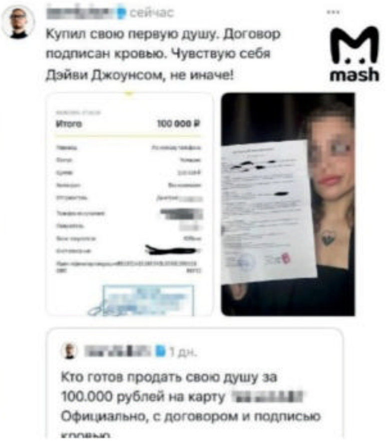
As Price and Joad recognised, hopes of eyeball-to-eyeball encounters with ghosts usually come to naught whenever they are sought deliberately, so Robert and I did not tarry longer. Passing on through the neighbouring village of Mellis – possessing the largest village green in the county, but no ghosts – we reached our last stop at The Four Horseshoes, Thornham Magna. Portions of this thatched pub date to the 15th century. An old well survives in its cellar and a large, shrivelled cat is preserved in the loft. Installed long ago to ward off evil spirits or witchcraft, as the cat has withered its protective quality has evidently also evaporated; Tom Parkhurst, landlord since 2008, tells you at least three ghosts haunt the place. They include a child and a lady who haunts the bar, restaurant and one bedroom where she is felt sitting on beds. Completing the trio is a smart looking 'gentleman' in top hat and tails who keeps to one room but has been witnessed through the window from outside. Tradition avers the lady was wife to a drunken brute named 'Jacob', their ultimately fatal union producing two boys, one of whom was deformed. Jacob imprisoned the disabled lad upstairs, feeding him only once daily. Eventually the distressed mother was provoked into killing Jacob, pushing him in the well. In the mayhem the elder son snatched his disabled brother and fled, with neither boy ever being seen again. The shade of the tragic mother now haunts the pub, "searching for her child". Whilst this story may be plausible, there is no documentary corroboration and it seems at variance with the convivial atmosphere of the pub, with Mr Parkhurst quoted as saying: "I can vouch for the building always having such a warm and welcoming feel and our ghosts don't seem to be overly evil…" and that "'Jacob'… seems a friendly enough chap." But then many a killer or abuser succeeds in affecting a deceptive and superficial charm ("Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; robes and furred gowns hide all" – *King Lear*, Act 4 Scene 6). Any strict Protestant divine from the Tudor days of the inn would have argued evil spirits may camouflage themselves, posing as departed souls ("When devils will the blackest sins put on, They do suggest at first with heavenly shows" – *Othello*, Act 2 Scene 3) Alternatively, this top-hatted apparition is perhaps a male member of the wealthy Henniker family, owners of the inn during the 19th century and related to the Hon. Mary Henniker (d.1902) folklorist and ghost story collector.

Such were our impressions and revelations whilst in open and receptive mood to traces and symbols of life after death imprinted upon one patch of mid-Suffolk, open to those who can read them. Such a quest is repeatable anywhere in Great Britain, for the realm of the paranormal is not a definable or limited sphere or territory. Rather, it is a labyrinth found wherever one seeks it, embedded within culture and landscape – a realm in which religious beliefs, folklore and experience weave in and out and where presences linger still.

THEY USED DARK FORCES

Woman sells her soul, Chinese football teams enlist evil spirits and Satan fiddles an election

ANP / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



[redacted] сейчас

Купил свою первую душу. Договор подписан кровью. Чувствую себя Дэйви Джоунсом, не иначе!

[redacted] 1 дн.

Кто готов продать свою душу за 100.000 рублей на карту [redacted] Официально, с договором и подписью кровью.

ABOVE: A Russian man called Dmitri allegedly offered 100,000 roubles for a soul, and found a seller called Karina, who blew most of the cash on collectible Labubu dolls. **BELOW**: Mike Lindell says Satan intervened in the 2020 US election.

LABUBU BOOBOO?

Using the social media network Telegram, a Russian marketeer naming himself only as "Dmitri" posted an ad offering 100,000 roubles (£927) to anyone who would sign a contract in blood selling him their soul. He was not expecting anyone to take him up on the offer, he says, but a 26-year-old woman did. "A young woman named Karina responded, accepted the deal, signed the document, and sealed it with blood," Dmitri wrote. "I just bought my first soul. I definitely feel like Davy Jones right now!" To prove it, he posted an image of Karina holding the signed contract on social media, along with a receipt for the money. For her part, Karina told the Telegram channel Mash that she cared little for her soul or what its new owner decides to do with it and had spent the money on a collection of Labubu dolls and a ticket to a concert by Russian folk singer Nadezhda Kadisheva. While both Dmitri and Karina seem to have taken the whole stunt very lightly, the Russian Orthodox Church did not. They issued an official statement saying that Karina had "truly sold her soul and therefore chose evil," and went on to predict "moral and personal decline, illness, suffering, and even death" for her. *odditycentral.com, 15 Sept 2025.*

BAD SPORTS

In China, while playing away at the Changchun Xidu Football Club, the team from Shanxi Chongde Ronghai found several yellow paper talismans, known as Fu, hidden in their changing rooms before the match. The Taoist talismans are believed to direct spiritual energy to bring about positive outcomes, but they can also be twisted to cause harm or misfortune, and the ones in Shanxi's dressing room read: "By imperial decree, Shanxi Chongde Ronghai will fail". In the match, Changchun, who were second in China's third tier of football, beat eighth place Shanxi two-nil, after which Shanxi reported them to the football authorities for attempting to influence the match by occult means. After considering the complaint, a statement was issued saying "The Chinese Football Association will resolutely and seriously deal with all kinds of violations of rules and regulations", and Changchun were fined 30,000 yuan (£3,168) for channelling evil spirits to help them beat their rivals. Chinese football teams have form when it comes to invoking spiritual assistance to win games: in 2017, Henan Jianye had 15 Taoist priests perform rituals on the field before their game against Shandong Luneng Taishan in an attempt to help them avoid relegation from the Chinese Super League. They went on to win the game and finish the season eight points clear of demotion. *scmp.com, 3 Jul 2025.*

> *"We're in a battle of biblical proportions, of evil and good"*

GAGE SKIDMORE

GHOST RIDER

A car being driven by a 31-year-old man in Loei Province, Thailand, was caught on CCTV careering erratically through a narrow alley and narrowly missing a motorcyclist before reversing to apparently try and hit her. It then collided with a man carrying his small son on a sidecar motorcycle, causing minor injuries, before speeding off without stopping. Police swiftly apprehended the driver, who tested positive for drugs, but released him without charge when he agreed to pay the father 40,000 baht (£920) in compensation. Following the incident, though, the driver's wife claimed that her husband had not been responsible for the mayhem as he had been possessed by an evil ghost at the time. She said that after he returned home, he exhibited strange behaviour, including performing traditional Thai dances and groaning in apparent pain, and had to be exorcised by a spirit medium the following day. She apologised for the trouble that the ghost had caused and promised to take steps to prevent it happening again. *aseannow.com, 12 Jun 2025.*

VOTE SATAN

Mike Lindell, the 64-year-old CEO of the US company MyPillow, which sells bespoke pillows, has decided that "Satan" was behind a computer algorithm he thinks was covertly loaded onto voting machines to "control" the 2020 US elections and ensure Donald Trump did not win, despite, he claims, getting the most votes (although there is no evidence for this).

Dominion Voting Systems are suing Lindell for defamation, and, during a press conference in Denver after a hearing in the case, he said, "We're in a battle of biblical proportions, of evil and good. This isn't a party thing. This is a thing for our country and our world", adding, "And when you say who's behind it all? Satan." Lindell explained that Satan's agents are "the uniparty, the Deep State, Globalists, and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party)" and "Antifa", saying that they are manipulating voting technologies at every level. "This is school board elections, this is anything done with computer." He believes "Eric, the Dominion guy," (Dominion CEO Eric Coomer) rigged the election in favour of Biden after a Satanically inspired "Antifa conference call" and advocates returning to paper ballots. Dominion previously won a $787 million (£589m) lawsuit against Fox News for making similar allegations. *thedailybeast.com 2 Jun 2025.*

NECROLOG

This month, we take the measure of the extraordinary man who was crucial in rediscovering the lost science of ancient metrology...

JOHN NEAL

John Neal, or "Nosher" as many of us knew him, was born on 20 February 1941, and died on 9 August 2025, aged 84, an extraordinary age really, all things considered.

But Nosh was an extraordinary man. For a start he had an extraordinary memory. He could remember everything he ever read. He could complete a killer sudoku without making a single note. He once said he even remembered being conceived!

He had an extraordinary career. He is the only person I ever met who lost a million pounds. At least four times. In four different ways. Karma payments for his misdeeds, Nosh would say.

I could go on, but I want to focus on his work. So, sadly, I can't tell you about the time he taught my dog to smoke. Or about the time he turned his jaguar over and had to crawl into the back to throw an entire bootload of secret packages out through the sunroof and over the hedge before the flashing lights arrived. One by one. Or about the time he took a lunchtime phone call from Cardiff. Ring ring. "Nosh man, do you know anyone who can use a thermal lance? We're in the bank vault now man". Or a dozen other tales. And I am sure other people could provide hundreds more.

No, instead we must now turn to Ancient Metrology, a subject so stultifyingly boring (to most people) that Nosh used to say you couldn't even give it away for free. But this was the subject most dear to Nosher's heart, and a mystery he would eventually unlock.

Nosh grew up for the most part in rural surroundings. Even as a lad, he said, that when he heard old folk in some smoky pub mention things like the "Cheshire mile" or the "Quarters of an acre", he would feel a great surge of interest.

STEVE MARSHALL

He studied agriculture and had a keen interest in archæology and history. Even in his teens, he realised that the English units of measure had an incredibly long pedigree and were an intrinsic part of our cultural heritage.

In his mid-twenties he met John Michell who was researching material for his magnum opus *The View Over Atlantis* (1969). It was the start of a lifelong friendship. John's book held that a high culture had arisen in prehistoric times and spread over the whole world, and that this culture had accurately measured the dimensions of the Earth and the Moon, and developed commensurate units which were still in use today.

But the ancient world was rife with measures: there were Greek feet, Roman feet, Egyptian remen, Jewish rods, Sumerian cubits and dozens more. Classical authors suggested they fitted together, but no one was quite sure how, or which ones were to be trusted.

In 1978 Nosh returned to England from California and reconnected with John, and they began seriously discussing metrology at length. Then, three years later, in 1981, John walked through Nosher's door in Wales – Nosh said "like the cat who got the cream, bastard" – and handed him a copy of his small book *Ancient Metrology*.

We need to rewind a bit here. Quite a bit actually. The idea that certain measures and temples were very old and encoded the dimensions of the Earth was not new. 300 years earlier, in the 1680s, Isaac Newton knew of the legend, and was seeking the exact length of the sacred Jewish cubit, the 10 millionth part of the Earth's radius, as he needed to know the size of the Earth for his theory of gravitation. To do this Newton was leaning heavily on surveys of Egyptian, Greek and Roman temples made in the 1640s by John Greaves.

However, Greaves's surveys revealed confusions, as the measures all seemed to have long and short values, often differing as 175:176 and as 440:441, a pair of variances confirmed in the 1880s by Flinders Petrie.

If your eyelids are beginning to feel heavy, don't worry, this is a quite normal response to ancient metrology.

However, to understand Nosher's achievement we must persist. In the 1970s an Italian Professor, Livio Stecchini, had shown that some common measures were related to others by simple fractions: so the Roman foot related to the Greek foot as 24 to 25. And the Mycenaean foot related to the Roman foot as 15 to 16, and to the Greek foot as 9 to 10.

A picture was emerging. John Michell's new book also claimed that the 440:441 ratio might have been used in antiquity to model the slightly squashed shape of the Earth. As every ancient temple, from the Great Pyramid to Stonehenge, was a model of the Earth. But what about the other measures and their variances?

By the 1990s Nosher was running a large pub in Lydney, Ross-on-Wye, when Her Majesty the Queen took an interest in his work. And it was during this long sabbatical under Royal patronage that he was able to read and research more deeply, finally making a series of breakthroughs, which were presented in his groundbreaking book *All Done With Mirrors* (2000) nearly a decade later.

Here is what Professor Michael Vickers, of Jesus College, Oxford, Curator of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum, wrote in a full-page review of Nosher's book in *Nature*, the most highly esteemed academic journal in the world:

"Thanks to John Neal's remarkable new book, ancient metrology – once the playground of Newton – regains its place at the centre of the study of antiquity. In the past, the widely attested variations in ancient linear measurements have been put down to sloppiness on the part of our ancestors. But Neal is able to show that such variations belong to a logical, elegant and cohesive system based on divisions of the Earth's surface... This is a major contribution to the history of science."

Nosh's work would continue for the next 20 years, with further breakthroughs, scholarly papers and books, and today he is considered the pre-eminent ancient metrologist in the world. A quite staggering achievement. Nosh had discovered that all the ancient measures, worldwide, formed a single self-correcting system, connected by simple harmonic fractions, similar to those found in music, plus those other two: 440:441, relating to the shape of the Earth and 175:176 which turned out to be the difference between two ancient values of pi: three and one eighth, used by the Romans, and three and one seventh, used by the Egyptians. Even today the Japanese foot relates to the English foot as the difference between these two fractions: 175:176.

Nosh had managed to do what Isaac Newton could not. He had looked into the Universe as deeply as any philosopher or surveyor of old, and restored the golden order of the ancient world for all to see.

Even John Michell was impressed, telling him: "The Divine always reveals itself through the minds of idiots."

To which Nosh replied: "You are an obtuse cunt."

With John coming back at him: "And you are a dissolute scholar."

Nosh always liked this description of himself.

A dissolute scholar.

A fitting epitaph for a remarkable man.

John Frederick Neal, aka "Nosher", ancient metrologist and dissolute scholar, born Waltham Abbey, Essex, 20 Feb 1941; died London, 9 Aug 2025, aged 84.

John Martineau

FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

HAUNTED FURNITURE

At the prompting of fellow fortean Chris Woodyard, I've recently become interested in haunted furniture. I've been particularly fascinated by how some sorts of furniture are associated with knocks, bangs and spectral figures, while others rarely attract this kind of attention. Now, dear reader, forget all that woodpulp sold out of IKEA and think of good old heirlooms that have aged over a couple of hundred years. What items are more likely to have creepiness oozing out of them?

Well, my very unscientific survey, with a few score references, suggests that the three most popular pieces of fortean furniture are as follows: in third place, we have ornamental clocks; in second place, wardrobes; and in first place, chairs. But why?

WARDROBES LOOM OVER YOU AND THEY HAVE DOORS THAT CAN OPEN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT!

Chris suggests to me that clocks sound like the human heart and were easily, in the 19th century, thought to be alive. There are, in fact, lots of tall but enjoyable tales about clocks being sympathetically associated with an individual, going haywire when their special person dies.

Wardrobes are a strange one. From what I can see there is not much in the way of haunted wardrobes in the 1800s, but they rise through the ranks rapidly in the 20th century. As one correspondent put it to me: they loom over you and they have doors that can open in the middle of the night! But why wasn't that the case in Victoria's reign? Is it possible that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), enhanced the idea of the wardrobe as portal? Note that Edith Nesbit had a story with a wardrobe that opened into another world way back in 1909. There are – this might be connected – a number of interesting postwar cases where fairies 'and things' flounce out of wardrobes and even one where a human victim is dragged in.

Chairs I'm bewildered by, but I suppose that often one chair was associated with one person and so when they died the spirit was thought to, well, slump around? Certainly, lots of chair legends are based around the idea that dead X still sits there; or even that if anyone sits in dead X's chair X will curse them. By the by, if chairs are the most haunted type of furniture then rocking chairs outclass all other seats.

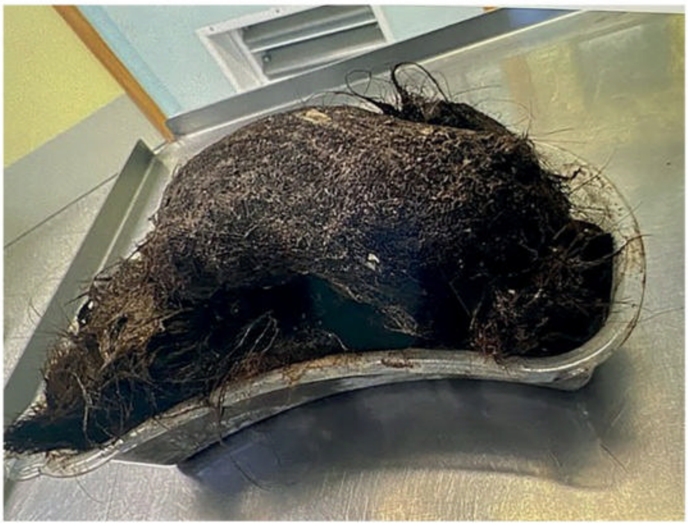
And non-ranked items of uncanny furniture? There are some cases of haunted beds, but they are few and far between. Trunks and chests do ok: you can get a body in there, of course. Then there are a few rugs and tables, occasionally with Devil marks or blood stains on them. But for horror, go for chairs, clocks and wardrobes at the auction house.

Simon Young's new book (edited with Davide Ermacora) is *The Exeter Companion to Changeling Lore*.

MEDICAL BAG

This month's patients present with giant hairballs, fart-based infections and disastrous AI diagnoses while clutching unsolicited urine samples

ABOVE LEFT: Christine Connell believes an E.coli infection in her sinuses resulted from her boyfriend releasing a disgustingly noxious fart close to her face.



ABOVE RIGHT: The melon-sized hairball removed from 14-year-old Erin Collins's stomach in a five-hour operation at Bristol Children's Hospital.

EXTREME FART HORROR

For seven years, Christine Connell from Australia was dogged by persistent facial pain until a nose swab revealed that the cause was an *E.coli* infection in her sinuses. Doctors were surprised to find the bacterium in Connell's sinus as it normally lives in the gut. Connell, though, thinks she has the answer; an incident that took place years ago when she was bedridden after ankle surgery. Then, she had been lying in bed when her boyfriend accidentally farted extremely close to her face. "He was just getting into bed and my face happened to be in the path of the fart that was released," she said, adding, "[It was] the worst fart I have ever smelled in my life. I couldn't breathe. I've never, ever, ever smelled anything that compares to that." Connell went on to explain, "How does [*E.coli*] get in your sinuses unless you have a boyfriend who farts disgustingly and you are forced to inhale it because you are immobile after ankle surgery?"

To add to Connell's woes, it turns out the bacteria are an antibiotic resistant strain, so she needs surgery to clear them out. "They're going to use general anæsthesia to go up there and physically scrape off where the bacteria has been and really wash it and get all of the infected tissue out of there," she said. Reflecting on her unlikely affliction, Connell said "I don't think it is common. It can happen. It has happened before, but it's definitely rare". Connell is no longer in a relationship with the farting boyfriend. *vice.com, 22 July; metro.co.uk, 30 May 2025.*

> *"It was the worst fart I have ever smelled in my life. I couldn't breathe."*

NOT TAKING THE P***

The Saltoun Surgery in Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, has taken to social media to plead with locals to stop bringing in "inappropriate or unsolicited" urine samples. The clinic says that they have been inundated with a "high volume" of unsolicited samples being dropped off by members of the public, who often use household containers instead of sterile collection bottles, rendering the samples useless for diagnostic purposes. Commenting on the situation, a doctor said that it was usually older people hoping to be tested for urinary tract infections who brought the samples in, without first consulting a doctor. "We really, really want patients to speak to a clinician for a proper medical assessment before we ask them to bring a sample in," they said. "And when they do, we will issue them with sample bottles to return, rather than random domestic containers which can sometimes be inappropriate." *[UPI] 2 Jul 2025.*

HAIRY!

Fourteen-year-old Erin Collins from Newquay in Cornwall started complaining of back pain in November 2024, which at times became so bad that she had to miss school. She went on to suffer from stomach problems and her symptoms steadily worsened. "She was suffering with really bad stomach cramps for a good six months," said her mother, Jodie. "I thought she could be lactose or gluten intolerant," but the tests came back negative and an ultrasound scan didn't pick up anything abnormal, leaving doctors baffled as to what could be behind Erin's decline.

By May, Erin was also suffering from anæmia and multiple nutritional issues, so she was taken in for an MRI scan, revealing a hard mass in her stomach, which doctors identified as a trichobezoar, a giant hairball caused by habitual hair chewing. She was immediately taken to Bristol Children's Hospital, where medics operated for five hours to extract the bezoar, which was the size of a melon. After the operation, Jodie explained that: "The surgeons said the smell was unbelievable. I'd imagine it was like your worst plughole. He said it was putrid and one of the biggest they'd ever dealt with." The obstruction had filled Erin's stomach, which meant she had not been digesting her food properly.

Erin needed a 10-day stay in hospital to recover, after which she was given a personalised course of vitamins and minerals to replenish the nutrients the hairball had prevented her digesting, and her stomach is likely to remain oversized for several years after the stretching it suffered. Jodie had not realised her daughter was a hair-chewer, saying, "I've never seen her put her hair in her mouth, which is why it was shocking to me," adding, "The surgeon said she could be doing it in her sleep without even realising. She twirls her hair a lot."

During the mediæval and Renaissance periods, bezoars were highly valued for their medical properties, fetching more than their weight in gold. They were featured in many cabinets of curiosity and human bezoars were particularly prized for their rarity and alleged ability to neutralise any poison. The US has a National Hairball Awareness Day, which takes place on 27 April. *metro.co.uk, 6 Aug 2025.*

HUMAN BARBECUE

In Zhejiang province in south-eastern China, an attempt to benefit from a traditional Chinese medicine remedy had a disastrous effect for a woman named only as Wang. The remedy claimed that sunbathing the back can "warm the yang energy, dispel dampness and cure illnesses", so Wang sat outside for two hours on a scorching hot day, sunning her back in the hope of reaping the benefits. However, on going indoors again, she immediately collapsed and lost consciousness. Rushed to hospital, it was discovered Wang had suffered an aneurysmal cerebral hæmorrhage and a serious brain hernia, requiring emergency surgery that left her in a coma, after which she needed a long period of rehabilitation to be able to sit up, stand, talk and eventually feed herself.

Wang's prolonged exposure to strong sunlight meant she had "practically 'barbecued' herself", and Ye Xiangming, from the Zhejiang Provincial People's Hospital, warned that "The saying 'sunbathing cures all diseases' has no scientific basis" and can be particularly dangerous for older people like Wang, who had underlying medical conditions, as it can lead to heatstroke, strokes and other serious medical consequences. *ndtv.com, 20 Jul 2025.*

TECH BROMISM

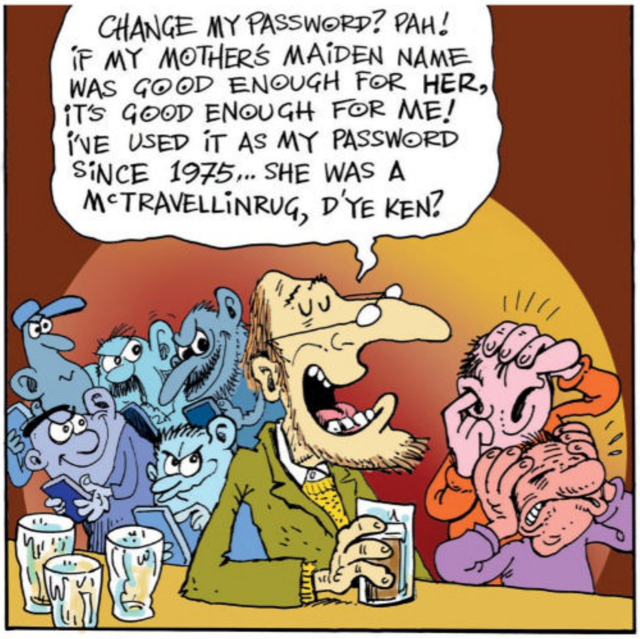
It seems that it is not wise to rely on AI for health advice; the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* reports a case in which a 60-year-old man consulted ChatGPT about removing salt from his diet, with disastrous consequences. Having read about the potentially negative effects of salt (sodium chloride) on health, he resolved to eliminate it from his diet and asked the AI what he should use instead. ChatGPT told him "chloride can be swapped with bromide, though likely for other purposes, such as cleaning," so the man took to using sodium bromide on his food instead of salt. Sodium bromide can be consumed by humans – it was used as a sedative in the early 20th century – but only in limited quantities. If larger amounts are taken it leads to bromine toxicity, also known as bromism, which results in psychosis and was believed to have been responsible for 10 per cent of psychiatric admissions in the days when it was used as a sedative.

The patient was discovered to be suffering from bromism when he went to a hospital claiming that a neighbour was trying to poison him. He had developed an elaborate system of dietary restrictions and, although he said he was thirsty, he was extremely paranoid about drinking any water offered to him. Twenty four hours after being admitted to hospital, he attempted to escape and ended up being sectioned for psychosis. It was during treatment that other symptoms of bromism, such as facial acne, excessive thirst and insomnia were recognised, allowing him to be detoxed and stabilised. The chatbot's guidelines state it is not "intended for use in the diagnosis or treatment of any health condition", but doctors remain concerned that AIs carried the risk of promoting "decontextualised information", and that any doctor being asked about salt alternatives would have asked follow-up questions to better understand the context. AIs do not usually do this, and a medical professional would be extremely unlikely to recommend consuming sodium bromide, although it is an appropriate sodium chloride substitute in other contexts. The authors of the paper on the case concluded that AIs "generate scientific inaccuracies, lack the ability to critically discuss results, and ultimately fuel the spread of misinformation". *theguardian.com, 12 Aug 2025*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

296: WRONG DETAILS, TRY AGAIN


CHANGE MY PASSWORD? PAH! IF MY MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME WAS GOOD ENOUGH FOR HER, IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME! I'VE USED IT AS MY PASSWORD SINCE 1975... SHE WAS A McTRAVELLINRUG, D'YE KEN?

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

You should change your passwords every 90 days.

The "truth"

Ever since passwords for accessing our various digital doodahs became part of our lives, we've been lectured on the need to alter them on a regular basis. Many companies and institutions actually insist on this, enforcing a changing of the guard every 30 or 60 or 90 days, or twice a year, or other sacred interval as chosen by their particular priestly caste. Experts in cyber-security say not only is this unnecessary (change your password when you suspect it's been compromised, otherwise leave it alone), but it might well be harmful. The problem – predictably – lies with the wetware. Research by the University of North Carolina found that enforced periodic changes encourage users to simplify their new passwords, so as to lessen the hassle. Most people will go for "transformations" – making minor alterations to an existing password. Complexity is the key to safety, add the experts, mixing every type of character and both cases while avoiding real words, with the length of passwords on its own contributing little.

Sources

www.cyberdefensemagazine.com/the-myth-behind; https://cybernews.com/security/password-myths-debunked

Disclaimer

Any corrections gratefully received, as ever – assuming you can somehow beat the letters page's impenetrable security.

Update

The claim by right-wing politician Nigel Farage that immigrants to the UK are eating swans in London's royal parks, because they come from countries "where it's quite acceptable", will have rung a bell with fans of foaflore (see **FT150:8; 181:28; 184:74; 187:74; 259:19; 451:25**). In the 19th century the swan-eaters were said to be Catholic Irish labourers. In the 2000s it was Polish workers; the Dublin *Evening Herald* of 20 June 2006, for instance, reporting the story as having spread from Edinburgh to Limerick to Dublin. In the US, of course, the imagined object of the aliens' hunger is usually domestic pets. Perhaps they don't have swans over there?

Aliens and orbs

NIGEL WATSON finds himself under attack from two-dimensional beings and weird metallic spheres

FLAT PACK ALIENS

The concept of inhabitants in a two-dimensional world is famously explored in schoolmaster Edwin Abbott's 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Their world is on a flat plane where they have no concept of height, so they can only perceive lines, squares and triangles. It is only when a spherical visitor from a three-dimensional world arrives that their perceptions are severely challenged. Abbott's intention was not only to satirise the hierarchical social structure of Victorian society but to make us look at mathematical concepts beyond normal reality.

In the 2014 *Doctor Who* episode "Flatline," (Series 8, Episode 9), transparent alien entities called 'the Boneless' come from a two-dimensional world, and on visiting Earth they reduce people and objects to two dimensional forms. This enables them to discover the nature of three-dimensional forms and transform themselves into three-dimensional entities; however, the process proves imperfect and their shape constantly changes and moves between dimensions.

Ufology equally challenges our own world view, and the following descriptions of entity encounters make us wonder if some aliens might actually come from a different dimension and have the ability to dip into ours from time to time.

A poster on Reddit states that "at about age 8 in the late 1960s, in Homewood, Alabama, my friend Paul (pseudonym) and I were running, one afternoon, along a path through the woods in the vacant lot between Sterrett and the yard around Bart's 2-storey house on Columbiana. (I still know Paul but since he doesn't clearly recall the incident I won't give his full name.) I happened to look to my left and saw two figures, which were about 3ft [90cm] tall. I stopped running and stared. They had 1 head, 2 arms, and 2 legs apiece, giving them a superficially humanlike outline, but they seemed flat, like cardboard cut-outs, and their colour was a uniformly featureless grey. Paul, catching up with me, saw them and exclaimed, 'Ghosts!' I immediately wondered why he thought they were ghosts; it had never occurred to me that ghosts might be flat. They both vanished without otherwise moving.

"Just as I felt unsatisfied at the time with calling them ghosts, I wouldn't call them aliens now. I do think they were real, but either not fully 3D or else not fully in the same 3D space that we, and the vacant lot around us, occupied. They were opaque. They were not shadows. I think they were aware of Paul and me, and chose to disappear after we both noticed them, but that is mere speculation. I don't know what they were."

BBC

"O day and night, but this is wondrous strange"

FLATLAND

A ROMANCE OF MANY DIMENSIONS

By A Square

THE HALL

LONDON
SEELEY & Co., ESSEX STREET, STRAND
Price Half-a-crown

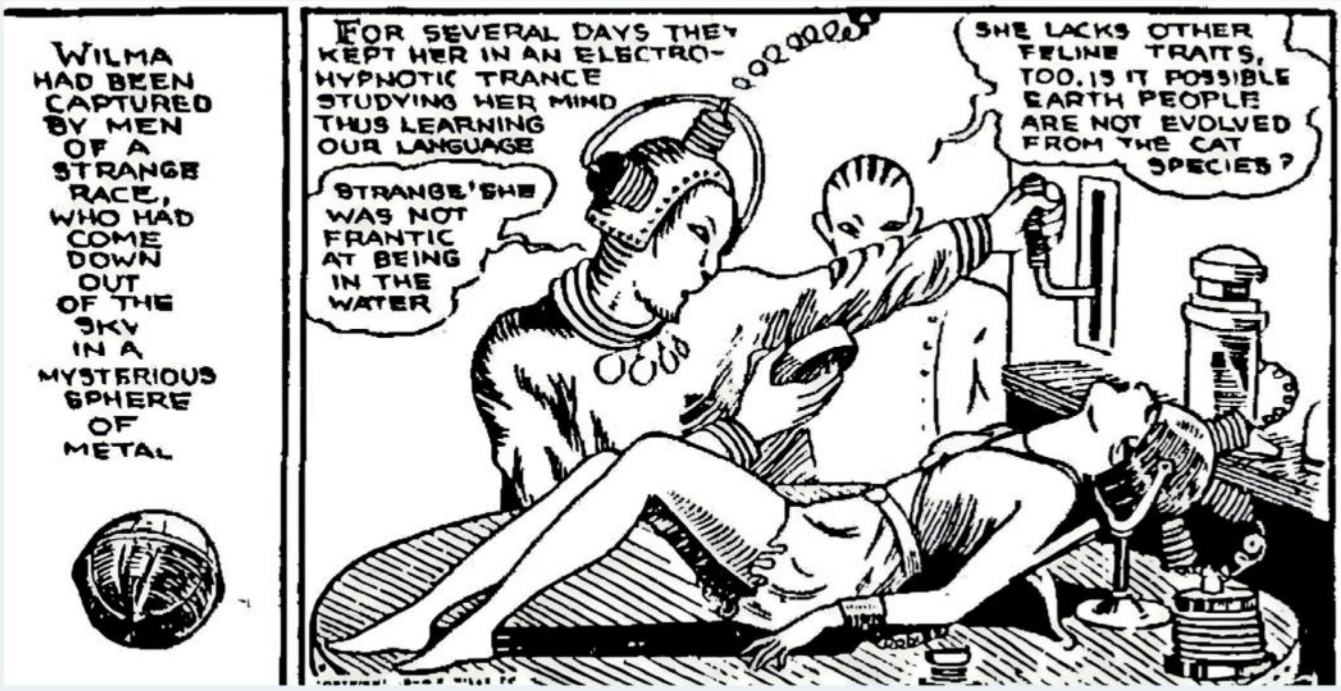
"And therefore as a stranger give it welcome"

ABOVE: Aliens from a two-dimensional world in the Doctor Who episode "Flatline". **BELOW**: The concept of a two-dimensional world had perviously been explored in Edwin Abbott's 1884 novel *Flatland*.

> "The figures seemed flat, like cardboard cut-outs, and their colour was a uniformly featureless grey"

In response to this account, a poster from Belgium claimed that: "in August 1998, I was at a lake with my cousin, talking about stuff and gazing in the water. It was about 17.00, the sun was shining, and lots of people were about. Suddenly I felt something uncomfortable, gazing in the water. I told my cousin to walk to some other place and as we did, suddenly seven ghostlike figures shining white appeared. We couldn't say a word because of the experience. But it was far from over; a bright light appeared above our heads and I was taken up and it felt as if I was Superman… But that feeling didn't last long… In a split second after I was lying on a table with a large creature with big black eyes staring at mine and I felt the creature you all call 'Grays' knew everything about me. I wanted to resist but it was impossible! I blacked out and seven hours later we were back at the same spot, but it was already dark and people were gone. The park was already closed! We had difficulties finding our way home… We trembled and were in fear of what happened, it changed my life and perception of life forever! Till this day my cousin never spoke again of what happened that day (he works in a psychiatric facility)."

Another Reddit user notes that at the age of eight, on holiday in Mexico, he saw a two-dimensional figure on his bedroom wall. It was like a roughly drawn silhouette of a 5ft 6in (168cm) man, filled in with a colourful, TV-like static pattern. A couple of years later he stated he saw another "two dimensional shape of a man, filled in with moving colourful TV static. Again I was frozen in fear and covered my head. I told my mom, and she said it was just my guardian angel. But,


WILMA HAD BEEN CAPTURED BY MEN OF A STRANGE RACE, WHO HAD COME DOWN OUT OF THE SKY IN A MYSTERIOUS SPHERE OF METAL
FOR SEVERAL DAYS THEY KEPT HER IN AN ELECTRO-HYPNOTIC TRANCE STUDYING HER MIND THUS LEARNING OUR LANGUAGE
STRANGE SHE WAS NOT FRANTIC AT BEING IN THE WATER
SHE LACKS OTHER FELINE TRAITS, TOO. IS IT POSSIBLE EARTH PEOPLE ARE NOT EVOLVED FROM THE CAT SPECIES?

ABOVE: A "mysterious sphere of metal" in the 1929 Buck Rogers comic strip "The Tiger Men of Mars". **BELOW**: Forestry worker Bob Taylor with a sketch of the spheres that attacked him, and ripped his trousers, in Dechmont Woods near Livingston, Scotland, in 1979.

why was I filled with such terror if it was my guardian angel?"

Paula Green, in my book *Portraits of Alien Encounters Revisited*, also relates seeing a strange two-dimensional entity and having a 'Superman' experience. In a strange dream she was at a beach party where no one seemed to see her. As she was wondering what was going on, a tall man who looked like a cardboard cut-out appeared on the main street. He had blond hair and looked ageless, with no lines or wrinkles on his face. He gave the impression of being a time traveller. His suit looked ridiculous, as it had pointed edges that tapered outwards to his shoulders; its colours seemed to change and shimmer, and it was hard to tell if they were grey, blue or silver. Paula estimates the entity was about seven feet (2.1m) tall, and appeared very broad. His arms and legs seemed unable to bend, so when walking, he looked like a robot.

Telepathically, he told her to hold his hand; on doing so she started to feel weightless, and was told to lean forwards and launch upwards, very much like the manner of Superman. She felt wind blowing in her hair and in the distance she could hear cars and the nearby beach party. Opening her eyes, she could see that they were at about the height of the streetlights, and she began enjoying the warmth of this summer night. Then she saw that the man she was holding hands with had turned into a grey.

This is the stuff of nightmares that probably only the Doctor could eradicate.

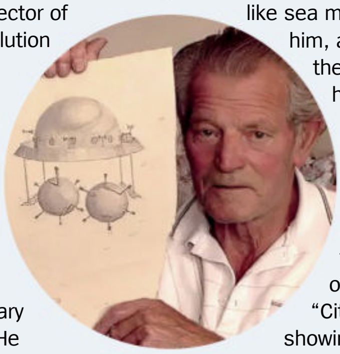
A LOAD OF ORBS

There are plenty of fantastic claims surrounding the Buga sphere that was supposedly seen to crash to the ground at Buga, Colombia, on 2 March 2025 (**FT460:4-5**). The red flag is that journalist and ufologist Jaime Maussan is involved!

Something much larger than this football sized (30-40cm/12-16in diameter) object was videoed by the *USS Omaha's* Combat Information Center off the coast of San Diego in 2019. This had a diameter of 2m (6ft) and displayed the trendy "transmedium" property that enabled it to fly at a speed of 254kph (158mph) into the sea.

Not to be outdone, former NASA astronaut Leroy Chiao saw two 91cm (3ft) diameter "metallic spherical orbs" pass within 6m (20ft) of his aircraft at an altitude of 2,743m (9,000ft). He guessed these orbs, seen over Houston, Texas, in August 2023, were secret military drones.

Sean Kirkpatrick, when director of the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO) told a NASA public meeting on 31 May 2023, that 1-4m (3-13ft) diameter metallic orbs are commonly seen throughout the world. They are usually seen at an altitude of 3,048-9,144m (10,000-30,000ft), have no "thermal exhaust" and can be stationary or make rapid manoeuvres. He concluded that they did not seem to be a security threat, and were not evidence of ET craft.



These orbs, although labelled as "metallic", are often seen to be white, silver or translucent. This suggests they could be reflective balloons rather than solid structures, and would explain why they show no thermal exhaust emissions and move erratically.

But, you can't fool a veteran ufologist like me. The truth is that a spherical spaceship is discreetly displayed in the Buck Rogers comic strip "The Tiger Men of Mars" published in 1930. The panel notes that "Wilma [Deering, Buck's girlfriend] had been captured by men of a strange race who had come down out of the sky in a mysterious sphere of metal." Fair enough, this was a huge sphere – but let's just think of it as a Mother Sphere, capable of ejecting baby metallic orbs.

Indeed, on 9 November 1979, Bob Taylor famously saw a large, 6.4m (21ft) diameter sphere land near Livingston, Scotland (**FT31:30; 56:48-49; 60:63; 64:9; 189:29; 223:26, 273:26, 411:46-47, 456:28**). Rolling out of it came two smaller metallic spheres that were covered in spikes, leading Taylor to describe them as being like sea mines. He says they seized him, although I'm not sure how they managed this, and then he passed out.

David Slater on his *Musings on Anomalous Culture* blog, observes that on Saturday, 29 September 1979, the first episode of Series 17 of the original *Doctor Who*, "City of Death", was aired, showing a spherical spacecraft with a flange around its circumference. It appeared again in the last episode of this series, on 20 October, just 13 days before Taylor's encounter. The *Doctor Who* spacecraft looks similar, and it even features a character who claims to have been attacked by it.

Was this the return of the Tiger Men of Mars? Or a *Doctor Who*-inspired hallucination? Or just a load of balls?
anomalousculture.blogspot.com/2010/05/spaceships-spheres-and-devils-herb.html

FAWCETT'S TOP TEN MYSTERY BEASTS

One hundred years after the disappearance of Colonel Percy Fawcett in Brazil, KARL SHUKER follows in the lost explorer's footsteps, seeking possible identities for the cryptozoological creatures Fawcett described... and sometimes even claimed to have encountered.

This year, 2025, marks the centenary of the still-unsolved disappearance amid Brazil's jungle wilderness of Lieutenant-Colonel Percy H Fawcett (1867-1925). He is the famous British explorer who conducted several expeditions in search of lost cities and traces of ancient civilisations hidden within the dense Amazonian jungles of South America's vast green continent. Indeed, it was during his search for the hypothesised 'Lost City of Z' when Fawcett (then aged 57) and his two companions vanished; his last communication received by the outside world was a letter to his wife dated 29 May 2025. What is less well known, however, is that he also documented a wide range of scientifically-unknown or unrecognised animals during those expeditions, some of which were allegedly encountered by him at first-hand, others made known to him via native testimony.

Yet as far as I am aware, no single article focusing specifically upon Fawcett's cryptozoological contributions has ever been published… until now. This article is a survey of (in no particular order) the 10 principal cryptids referred to by Fawcett in his classic posthumously-published 1953 book *Exploration Fawcett* (compiled by his son Brian from his manuscripts, letters, journals, records, and various published accounts). Indeed, no fewer than four of these mystery beasts were alluded to by Fawcett within a single sentence from that book, in which he referred to the Amazon as "a poisoned hell that could never be explored on foot," home to "60 foot [18m] anacondas capable of picking a man out of a canoe, savage ape men, an infested plain of deadly snakes, bats so big they looked like pterodactyls, ferocious black panthers, white Indian tribes, swarms of biting bees, fires in the distance."

So here they are, together with a further six.

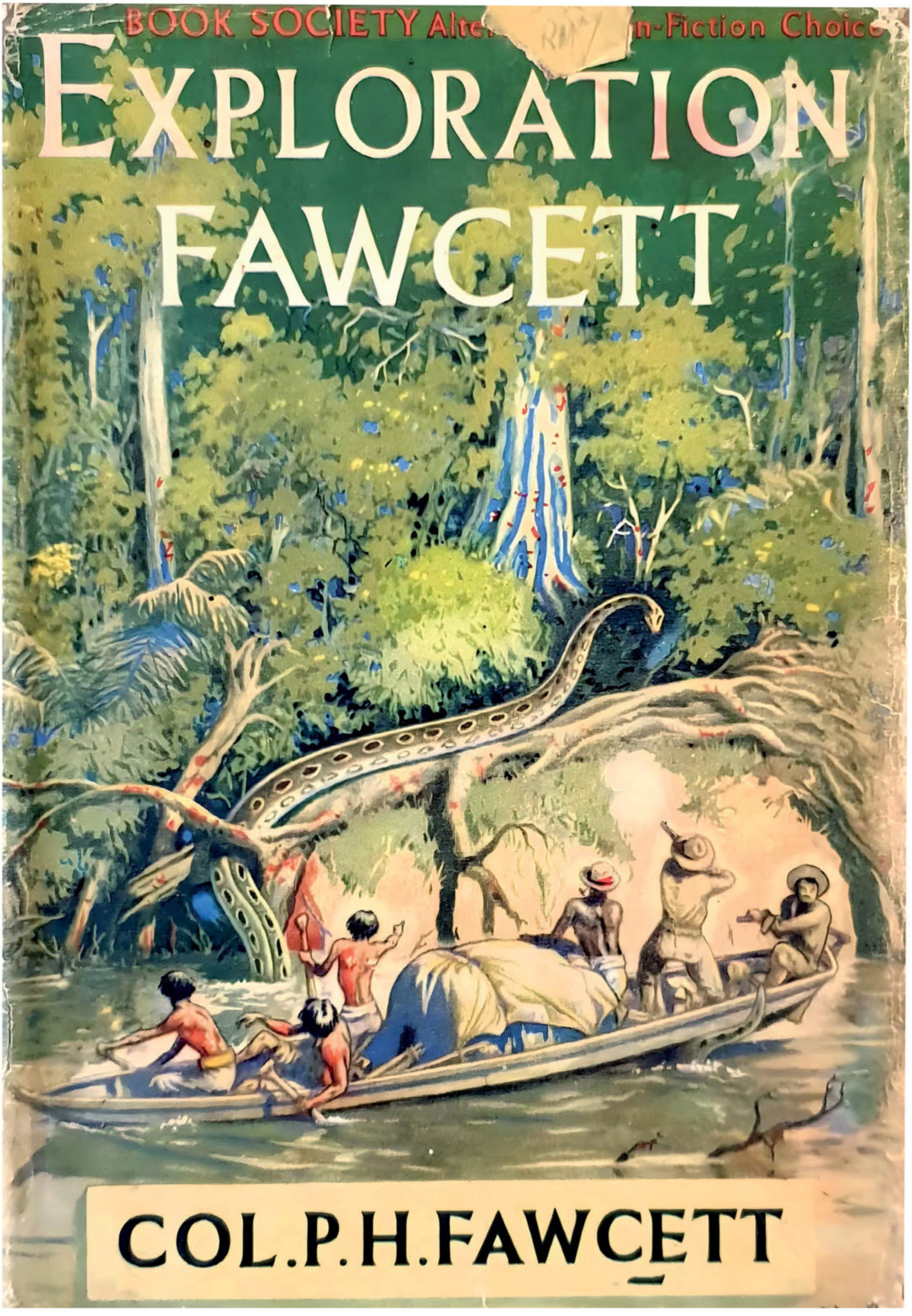
"60-FOOT ANACONDAS, SAVAGE APE MEN, AND BATS SO BIG THEY LOOKED LIKE PTERODACTYLS"

LEFT: Lieutenant Colonel Percy H Fawcett. **FACING PAGE:** Fawcett's encounter with a giant anaconda as illustrated on the cover of his posthumously published book *Exploration Fawcett*.

1. GIANT ANACONDA

Perhaps Fawcett's most famous alleged crypto-encounter took place in January 1907, while leading an expedition to map out the Rio Abuna and Rio Acre in Brazil's Acre State, near its borders with Bolivia and Peru, on behalf of Britain's Royal Geographical Society. According to his book, Fawcett and his crew of native helpers were in their long boat "drifting easily along in the sluggish current not far below the confluence of the Rio Negro" when they suddenly saw the huge triangular head and several feet of undulating body belonging to a massive anaconda as it began to emerge from the river and onto the bank. To ensure that it did not attempt to attack, Fawcett shot the great serpent, and following its shuddering death-throes he stepped from his boat and later claimed in his journal that as far as it was possible to measure the body, a length of 45ft (13.7m) lay out of the water, with a further 17ft (5m) still in it, yielding a total length of 62ft/19m (see **FT33:38-39**).

Fawcett was renowned for his sober, meticulously-documented observations, but, not surprisingly, his assertions regarding its huge length were met with scepticism. This is because South America's common (green) anaconda, *Eunectes murinus*, rarely exceeds 20ft (6m) in length, let alone 60ft. Even the largest species of snake ever recorded, *Titanoboa cerrejonensis*, formally named and described in 2009 (see **FT248:16**) and existing 58-60 million years ago during the Mid-to-Late Palæocene Epoch in what is today Colombia, is estimated to have grown to a total length of 'only' 40-50ft (12-15m). However, numerous anecdotal, reputed eyewitness reports of truly enormous anacondas have been filed from several different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EXPLORATION FAWCETT
COL. P. H. FAWCETT

regions of South America, and in Brazil the native people have even given such giants their very own, specific name: the sucuriju gigante. Moreover, because anacondas spend most of their time in water, it is possible that they could indeed attain extremely sizeable dimensions, because the water would buoy their great weight. So perhaps Fawcett was indeed accurate in his claims regarding the shot anaconda's stupendous size after all.

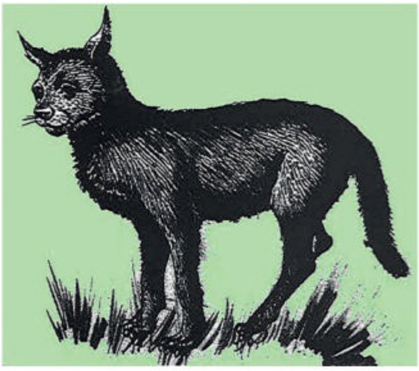
2. TELESCOPIC SNAKE

Although many remarkable new animal species have first come to scientific attention through explorers taking note of native testimony, one claimed creature that is highly unlikely to do so is the telescopic snake of Bolivia. During his expedition to Bolivia in 1907, Fawcett had reached San Ignacio, the capital of Chiquitos Province, an area that he referred to as being possibly the worst terrain for venomous snakes and snake-perpetrated human fatalities in the whole of South America. So it would be here, if anywhere, that reports of extraordinary snakes seemed most likely to emerge. Sure enough, several locals assured him that the area harboured a truly bizarre serpent, which although not very venomous and not unusual in size, measuring a mere 3ft (90cm), purportedly exhibited the far from mundane ability to telescope into itself before striking!

Fawcett rightly deemed this fabulous feat to be a physical impossibility, and, hardly surprisingly, never encountered a specimen. Although certain vertebrates possess retractable jaws (perhaps most famously the goblin shark, *Mitsukurina owstoni*), for fundamental anatomical reasons none can telescope its entire body. Could, therefore, the telescopic snake's claimed behaviour simply be an exaggerated description of a serpent that recoiled its body quite significantly before striking forward?

3. MARICOXI

During a 1914 expedition to Serra dos Parecis in Brazil's Mato Grosso State, Fawcett and his companions briefly encountered two hairy humanoid entities, which he described in *Exploration Fawcett* as "large, hairy men, with exceptionally long arms, and with foreheads sloping back from pronounced eye ridges – men of a very primitive kind, in fact, and stark naked". This menacing duo threatened him with bows and arrows before running away. These hirsute, belligerent beings are known to local Indian tribes as the maricoxi, and are said to be cannibalistic.



JEREMY MALLINSON

> "LARGE, HAIRY MEN WITH LONG ARMS... MEN OF A VERY PRIMITIVE KIND, IN FACT, AND STARK NAKED"

Two days later, while travelling through some open forest that morning, Fawcett and company came upon an entire maricoxi village, containing primitive shelters and populated by what he referred to as "great ape-like brutes… hideous ape-men". They were grunting loudly, and each one was armed with a bow and arrows. One "enormous" individual, "hairy as a dog" with "pig-like eyes half hidden under the overhanging brows", threatened Fawcett by aiming directly at him but not actually firing from its bow a sturdy barbed arrow on two separate occasions; but when it did so a third time, Fawcett shot his pistol into the ground at its feet, terrifying the creature, which fled along with all the others from their village. As they fled they fired arrows at Fawcett and his companions, who duly returned their barrage by firing their pistols several times into the branches of nearby trees to frighten them, before retreating down the trail. Happily, the maricoxi did not follow them.

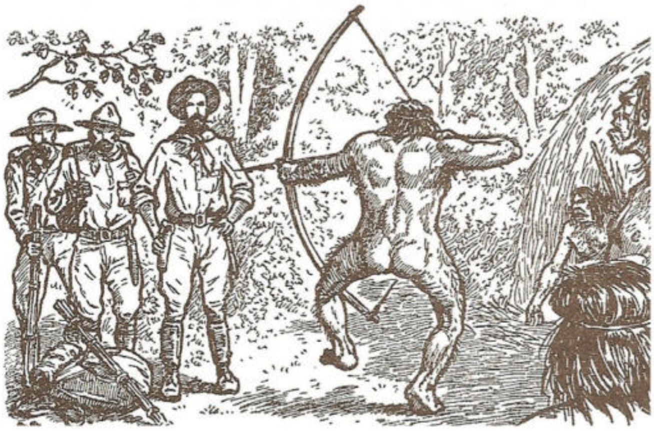
There has been much dispute in cryptozoological circles as to whether the maricoxi constituted a primitive tribe of *Homo sapiens* or whether they belonged to a separate proto-human species or even represented an advanced South American ape analogue (true anthropoid apes are known only from the Old World).

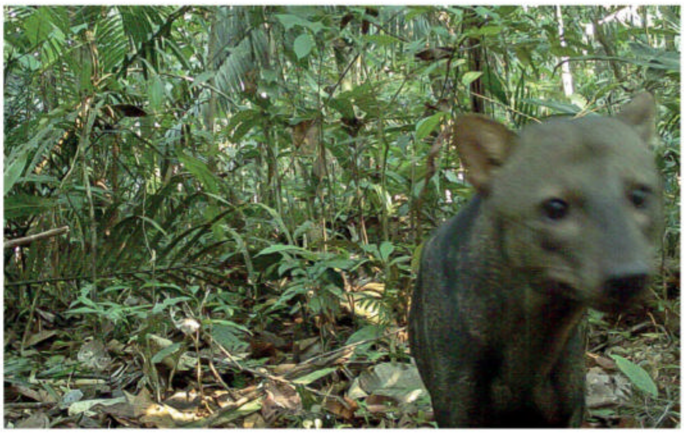
4. MITLA

While describing various strange animals inhabiting the Madidi, a vast expanse of montane and rainforest terrain near La Paz in Bolivia, Fawcett noted in his journal: "In the forests were various beasts still unfamiliar to zoologists, such as the mitla, which I have seen twice, a black, doglike cat about the size of a foxhound."

Over the years, various taxonomic identities have been proposed for the mitla and some searches for it have been conducted, but its reality remains unconfirmed. Veteran American zoologist and cryptozoologist Ivan T Sanderson claimed that during an animal collecting expedition to South America a decade or so after Fawcett's report, he had made several unsuccessful attempts to shoot a specimen and had actually obtained a legless skin of one, which apparently resembled a huge black serval (a medium-sized African wild cat) with pricked ears and tiny lynx-like tail. However, he failed to reveal what had happened to this ostensibly priceless specimen; but when it comes to claiming to have encountered mystery animals, and even to have obtained skins which never materialise for scientific examination, let's just say that Sanderson had form – lots of form!

In September 1965, Jersey Zoo's then director, Jeremy Mallinson, conducted a two-month-long solo expedition to Bolivia specifically seeking the mitla, but he failed to find one. In his book *Travels in Search of En-*





WHALDENER ENDO / CREATIVE COMMONS

TOP: Flash card illustration of the mitla prepared by Jeremy Mallinson for showing to locals during his search for this mysterious mammal in Bolivia. **ABOVE LEFT:** An illustration showing Fawcett's encounter with the hostile maricoxi. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The small-eared dog, *Atelocynus microtis*, could be a possible candidate for Fawcett's mitla.

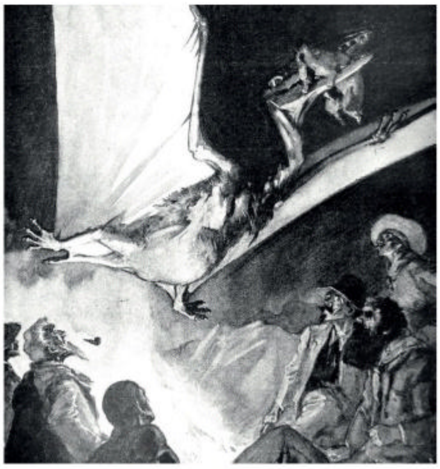
dangered Species (1989), Mallinson speculated that it may be the all-black colour morph of a New World cat known to inhabit Bolivia, the jaguarundi, *Puma yagouaroundi*. However, this species is distinctively short-legged and long-bodied (hence its colloquial moniker – the otter cat), so it recalls neither Fawcett's foxhound allusion nor Sanderson's serval comparison.

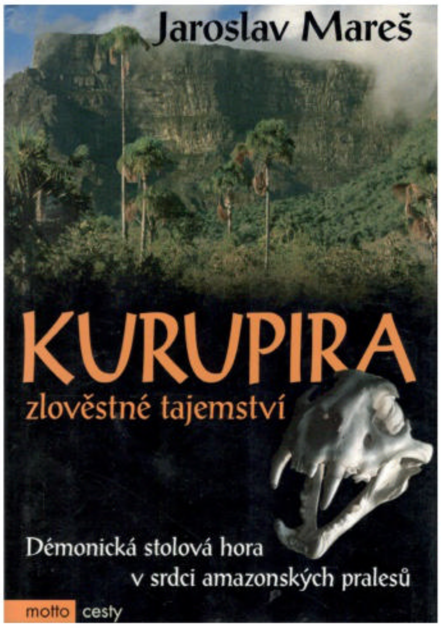
Another suggested mitla candidate is a sometimes black-furred, sometimes cream-furred weasel relative called the tayra, *Eira barbara*. Yet this species is not very dog-like either, and is so familiar to and well-recognised by natives that they sometimes even keep specimens as pets. In his book *Searching For Hidden Animals* (1980), celebrated American cryptozoologist Professor Roy P Mackal opined that the mitla could be the bush-dog, *Speothos venaticus*. However, this species is reddish-brown when adult, not black, and is relatively short-legged, again not recalling Fawcett's foxhound comparison.

Conversely, as I proposed in my *Mystery Cats of the World* (1989), one species that definitely recalls the mitla is the small-eared dog, *Atelocynus microtis*. Scarcely known in the wild until the advent of trail cameras revealed the presence of this highly secretive, seldom encountered species, it has a very disparate geographical distribution in South America, but its existence in a Bolivian locality quite close to the Madidi was formally confirmed in the early 2000s by biologist R Wallace. Its head-and-body length ranges from just over 2ft to 3ft (60-91cm), plus an extra 1ft (30cm) of tail, and it stands 1-1.5ft (30-45cm) at the shoulder. Its pelage is black or dark brown dorsally, shading ventrally to a dull reddish-brown. But its most distinctive feature is its striking, unexpectedly feline gait, very different from the less agile movements of dogs. All of these characteristics correspond well with Fawcett's mitla. How ironic it would be, therefore, if his ostensibly dog-like cat ultimately proves to be a cat-like dog instead.

5. BRAZILIAN/BOLIVIAN BLACK PANTHER

The mitla was not the only black feline cryptid referred to by Fawcett in his book. He also briefly mentioned "ferocious black panthers" that inhabited the borderland between Brazil and Bolivia and terrified the local Indians – but what were these formidable felids? The most conservative explanation is that they are simply melanistic (all-black) specimens of the jaguar, *Panthera onca*, the New World's largest cat species, which commonly exhibits melanism in the wild. Yet why should such specimens be any more terrifying and ferocious than normal, rosetted jaguars? The other very large feline species native to South America is the puma or cougar, *Puma concolor*, but in stark contrast to the jaguar, melanism in this species is scarcely known at all. In Peru, an all-black and highly aggressive yet equally mystifying crypto-cat has been reported by the indigenous people, who call it the yana puma – so, if real, might this creature also occur in the Bolivian/Brazilian borderlands and thus explain Fawcett's "black panther"?





LEFT: Terrifying pterodactyls in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. **BELOW LEFT:** Doyle was inspired by the Waika Indians' tales of the washoriwe that lived on the Kurupira mesa. Czech zoologist Jaroslav Mareš has written three books specifically devoted to Kurupira and its mysteries.

Also of interest is that in 1924 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published a short story entitled "The Story of the Brazilian Cat", whose titular subject was a huge, ferocious, ebony-furred, and scientifically-mysterious felid that had been captured in the headwaters of the Rio Negro in Brazil. According to the story: "Some people call it a black puma, but really it is not a puma at all." It is well known that Fawcett met Conan Doyle while the latter was lecturing in London, so did Fawcett speak about his enigmatic "black panther" and duly inspire Doyle to write his story, I wonder?

6. GIANT BATS AND/OR PTERODACTYLS?

After his reference to the Amazon being home to "bats so big they looked like pterodactyls", Fawcett didn't elaborate upon this tantalising assertion; but there is a second, more detailed source of information that links him to tales of a pterodactylesque terror.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was greatly inspired when writing his novel *The Lost World* (1912) by local Waiká Indian reports of huge monstrous creatures said to inhabit a lofty tepui or mesa called Kurupira on the Venezuelan-Brazilian border; Fawcett had told him of this after leading an expedition in 1908 to some imposing sandstone tepuis in Bolivia known as the Franco Ricardo hills. The Waiká claimed that one such creature, which they termed the washoriwe, would sometimes swoop down from Kurupira's high summit into the jungle at its base, skimming through this Indian tribe's territory on huge wings that boasted a span of 20ft (6m) or more. Moreover, it sported a very long pointed beak, and bore a long bony backward-pointing crest upon its head.

According to traditional Waiká lore, this terrifying entity is the immortal forefather of all vampire bats. Yet whereas the immortal forefathers of all other beasts in Waiká lore closely resemble their respective descendants (except for their much greater size), the long-beaked, bony-crested washoriwe bears scant resemblance to the short-faced, crestless vampire bats, but seems irresistibly pterodactylian. Moreover, whereas vampire bats are strictly nocturnal, the washoriwe reputedly flies only during the daytime. Giant bat, living pterodactyl, or fanciful folklore? You decide!

7. LIVING DINOSAURS?

Alluding in his book to unidentified beasts allegedly inhabiting the forests of Bolivia's Madidi region, Fawcett included the following tantalising but fascinating snippet:

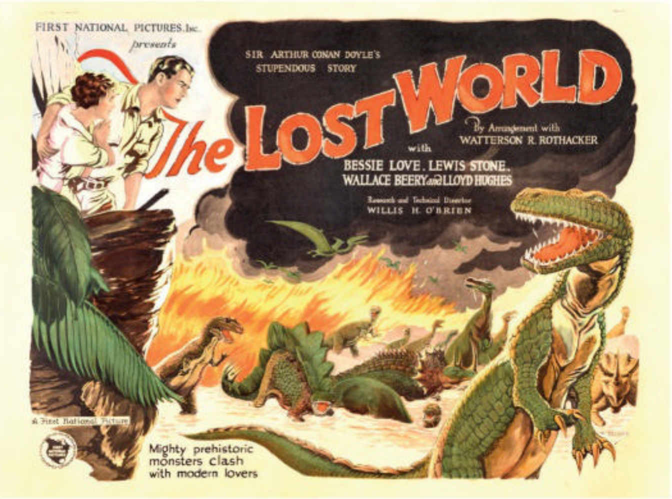
"…some mysterious and enormous beast has frequently been disturbed in the swamps – possibly a primeval monster like those reported in other parts of the continent. Certainly tracks have been found belonging to no known animal – huge tracks, far greater than could have been made by any species we know."

If we choose to ignore the more conservative prospect that this enormous swamp-dwelling beast was, if real, an exceptionally large form of caiman (there are several species of these alligator-related crocodilians existing in South America) and instead take even remotely seriously Fawcett's own tentative suggestion that it was "a primeval monster", his mention of tracks implies footprints. This in turn would favour dinosaurs with fully-formed feet rather than flippered plesiosaurs, but little else can be deduced from such a brief description.

A more detailed account appeared in a letter from Fawcett published by London's *Daily Mail* newspaper on 17 December 1919. The relevant portion reads:

"The Congo swamps are not the only region suspect of harbouring relics of the Miocene age.

As I hinted in lectures in London some years ago, a similar beast is believed to exist in South American swamps. A friend of mine, a trader in the rivers and for whose honesty I can vouch, saw



WHALDENER ENDO / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: Dinosaur survivors in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Could the Goliath bird-eating spider be Fawcett's Apazanga? **BELOW:** Jeremy Wade encounters a specimen of the South American goliath catfish or piraiba in an episode of his *River Monsters* TV programme.

in somewhere about Lat. 12 S. and Long. 65 W. [Bolivia-Brazil borderland] the head and neck of a huge reptile of the character of the brontosaurus. It was a question of who was scared most, for it precipitately withdrew, with a plunging which suggested an enormous bulk. The savages appear to be familiar with the existence and tracks of the beast, although I have never come across any of the latter myself...These swamps over immense areas are virtually impenetrable."

If such a sighting were to be believed, a caiman identity can be readily discounted, as no known species of modern-day crocodilian has a very elongate neck for it to induce comparison by Fawcett between this cryptid and the famous sauropod dinosaur Brontosaurus. I have documented additional reports of long-necked sauropod-like 'monsters' of South America in my two books on purported prehistoric survivors.

ICON FILMS

8. APASANCA

In a 1910 article concerning his Royal Geographical Society's expedition to the Bolivian/Brazilian borderlands, published in the *Geographical Journal*, Fawcett mentioned in passing the presence there of "venomous giant spiders". However, in his book he provided a more detailed account of two separate incidents featuring this reputedly deadly arachnid, dubbed the apasanca or apazauca spider, which he described as "a sort of black tarantula so large that a plate would scarcely cover it." The first incident featured a specimen inhabiting the thatched roof of a room at an inn on the southern portion of the Mapiri Trail, which fatally bit several guests sleeping in that room after lowering itself from the roof onto each of them in turn on successive nights, allegedly causing their bodies to turn black from its venom's virulent action. The second incident saw Fawcett himself having a very narrow escape, when one of these lethal spiders crawled inside his sleeping bag while he was camping at the head of the Yalu River. As he climbed inside it, the apasanca scuttled up his arm and over his back, so he brushed it off, whereupon it fell onto his other hand and clung there tenaciously until he was able to shake it off, the spider finally dropping onto the ground.

"A SORT OF BLACK TARANTULA SO LARGE THAT A PLATE WOULD SCARCELY COVER IT"

Based upon its morphology as described by Fawcett, cryptozoologists have speculated that if not a species still unknown to science the apasanca may be a composite creation resulting from two separate known species having been erroneously combined in descriptions. One is the goliath bird-eater, *Theraphosa blondi*, the world's largest recognised spider species by both mass (up to 6.2oz/176g) and body length (up to 13in/33cm), native to northern South America, which matches the size and overall appearance reported for the apasanca spider, but whose bite is not deadly. The other is the Brazilian wandering spider, *Phoneutria nigriventer*, somewhat smaller than the goliath bird-eater but equipped with a highly toxic, sometimes fatal bite (see Alien Zoo, **FT462:20**).

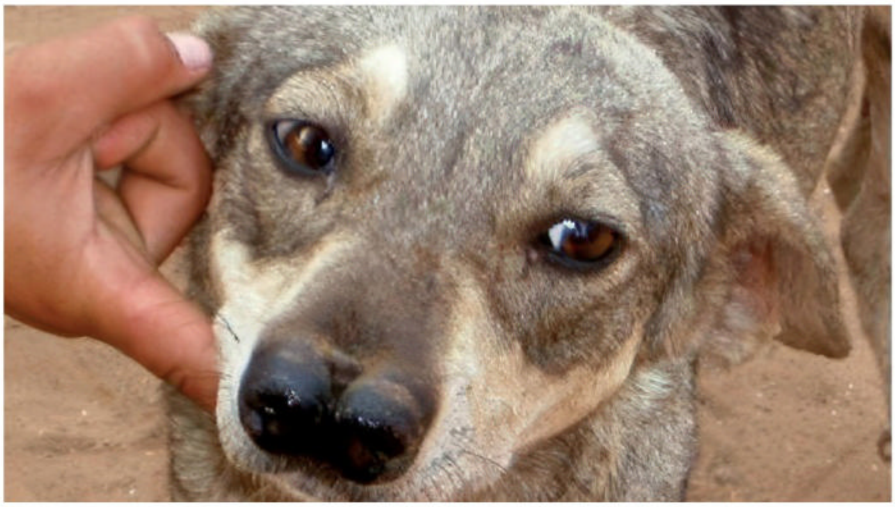
9. MANGURUYU

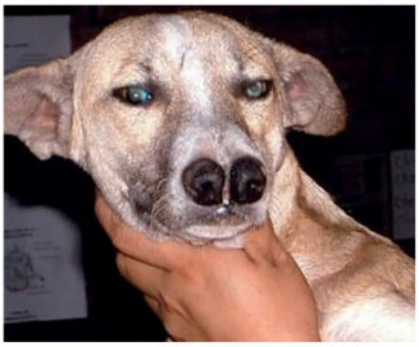
In his book, Fawcett wrote that the Paraguay River, which runs through Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina, contains a species of: "freshwater shark, huge but toothless, said to attack men and swallow them if it gets a chance… The shark exists beyond doubt." However, few sharks inhabit freshwater, and none is toothless. So if this mystery fish, locally termed the manguruyu, is indeed a shark, it is fundamentally different from any currently known to science – but it might not be a shark. An identity suggested by British cryptozoological researcher Mike Grayson is a very large sturgeon. Some sturgeons are slightly reminiscent of sharks and can attain great sizes. But as Grayson has also pointed out, sturgeons do not attack and swallow people, and there is no known species of South American sturgeon to serve as a zoogeographical precedent.

I consider that a catfish identity is more plausible than either shark or sturgeon. South America is home to more catfish species than anywhere else, and some of those are among the world's largest. In Europe, moreover, the European giant catfish or wels, *Silurus glanis*, has often been accused of swallowing people – although whether fact or folklore remains a matter of dispute (see **FT264:24-25, 290:32-37**).

Catfishes do usually possess teeth, at least on their vomer bone, but old specimens of some species are entirely toothless. The giant pa beuk, *Pangasianodon gigas*, of southern Asia's Mekong River is one such example, and at up to 10.5ft (3.2m)ong it is the world's largest species of fish confined entirely to freshwater. Incredibly, however, it somehow remained undiscovered by science until as late as 1930. So, might Fawcett's giant toothless "shark" – aptly dubbed 'Gums' by Grayson – be based upon elderly edentate catfish individuals, belonging to a still-undescribed extra-large species?

Aternatively, German cryptozoological researcher Markus Bühler has mentioned to me that an extremely large species of South American goliath catfish known as the piraiba, *Brachyplatystoma filamentosum*, which is already known to attain a total length of up to 12ft (3.6m), has a deceptively shark-like body outline. Consequently, 'Gums' reports may have been based upon sightings of exceptionally large, geriatric piraibas.





LEFT: Bella, the double-nosed Andean tiger hound discovered by Colonel John Blashford-Snell in Eastern Bolivia in 2005. **BELOW LEFT:** Two years later, the Colonel met Bella's son, Xingu. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Colonel John Blashford-Snell, who described Xingu as "very intelligent and with a wonderful sense of smell, as you might think."

ANDREW HOLT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

10. DOUBLE-NOSED ANDEAN TIGER HOUND

I end this list of 10 Fawcett-documented cryptids with one that I feel has since been accurately identified. In 1913, while visiting Santa Ana, a post on the Mamoré River passing through eastern Bolivia, Fawcett spied a very striking creature:

"Here we saw for the first and only time a breed of dog known as the Double-Nosed Andean Tiger Hound. The two noses are as cleanly divided as though cut with a knife. About the size of a pointer, it is highly valued for its acute sense of smell and ingenuity in hunting jaguars. It is found only on these plains."

An amusing line drawing of a double-muzzled dog appears on the inside cover of Fawcett's book in its original dustjacketed hardback edition, after which this twin-snouted canine curiosity was duly forgotten – until almost a century later. That was when the intrepid modern-day explorer Colonel John Blashford-Snell (for an interview with Blashers, see **FT70:30-34**) saw a remarkably similar beast while leading an expedition through the very same area, as reported in the *Daily Mail* on 10 September 2005.

Blashers saw in a remote village there a dog whose two nostrils were set totally apart from each another, like the barrels of a double-barrelled shotgun. Making enquiries, he learnt that this dog, called Bella, was not a deformed individual but rather a specimen of a distinct, highly-prized, yet nowadays rare breed in the area, and which was referred to locally by the same name that Fawcett had recorded – the double-nosed Andean tiger hound ('tiger' is a popular term in Latin America for the jaguar).

On 17 September 2005, the *Daily Mail* published a follow-up feature containing photographs of other, putative Bellas sent in by readers. Most noteworthy was a photo of Henry, a Pachon-Navarro. This rare Iberian breed, related to pointers, is characterised by a very unusual skull, formed into two separate channels with a ridge wide enough for human fingers to be placed inside. Intriguingly, split-nosed Spanish pointers were taken to Latin America by the conquistadors during the 16th century. So perhaps Henry and Bella share a common ancestor, not just an uncommon nose.

Today, a century later, there is still no universally-accepted explanation for the disappearance in 1925 of Fawcett's three-man party amid the Amazon's "poisoned hell". And with the sole exception of the double-nosed Andean tiger hound, the same is also true of the array of anomalous beasts recorded by him there. But perhaps the truth behind his party's mysterious fate will emerge one day, together with – and this time in more tangible, physical form – at least some of his fascinating, thought-provoking cryptids.

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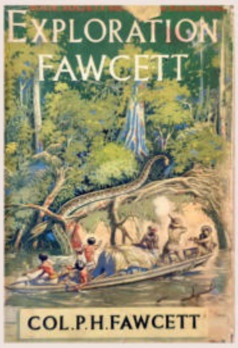


My Big Fat Greek Dream Adventure

The Ancient Greeks, when feeling a bit off-colour, would often repair to sacred centres where they would seek to induce dreams of the healing gods Asclepius and Amphiaraus. Intrepid oneironaut **GARY LACHMAN** decided to retrace their steps on a modern-day "dream oracle retreat".

When Sarah Janes, author of *Initiation Into Dream Mysteries* (Destiny Books, 2023), asked if I would be interested in collaborating with her on a "dream oracle retreat" in Greece, it didn't take long for me to say yes. I had never been to Greece, but I had grown up reading the Greek myths and as a boy was a great fan of their popular, if sometimes inaccurate, representation in "sword and sandal" films like *Hercules* (1958) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). That the trip would centre around some of the principal "dream incubation" sites of ancient Greece – healing centres, where those afflicted with illness or injury sought a nocturnal visit from the god Asclepius and a cure from their affliction – made it even more irresistible.[1] I had written a book about precognitive dreams, mostly my own, in which bits and pieces of the future turn up "ahead of time," and that seemed to fit well with the oracular theme of the trip.[2]

The idea of consciously inducing a dream, as the priests and healers of these ancient sites had done, or at least had tried to do, was also intriguing. Sarah, a practiced lucid dreamer – one, that is, who, while dreaming, is aware she is dreaming (see pp.40-45 for more on lucid dreaming) – wanted the trip to be more than a guided tour of famous historical sites, notwithstanding her equally lucid and comprehensive "daylight" knowledge about them. The idea was for the participants to use the sites as earlier seekers had and, under her guidance, and that of another collaborator, Danny Nemu, hypnotist and heretical medicine-man, slip into the liminal state on the edge of sleep and enter a dream knowingly. Along the way there would be attempts at dream telepathy, shared dreaming, synchronicities, and other odd phenomena associated with dreaming. My own contribution to the journey was nothing so exciting as this: I simply gave a talk about precognitive dreams.

NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM ATHENS

LEFT: A relief from the sanctuary of the healing god Amphiaraus at Oropos, now in the National Archaeological Museum Athens. **FACING PAGE:** Patients sleeping in the temple of Asclepius at Epidavros in a painting by Ernest Board, c.1912.

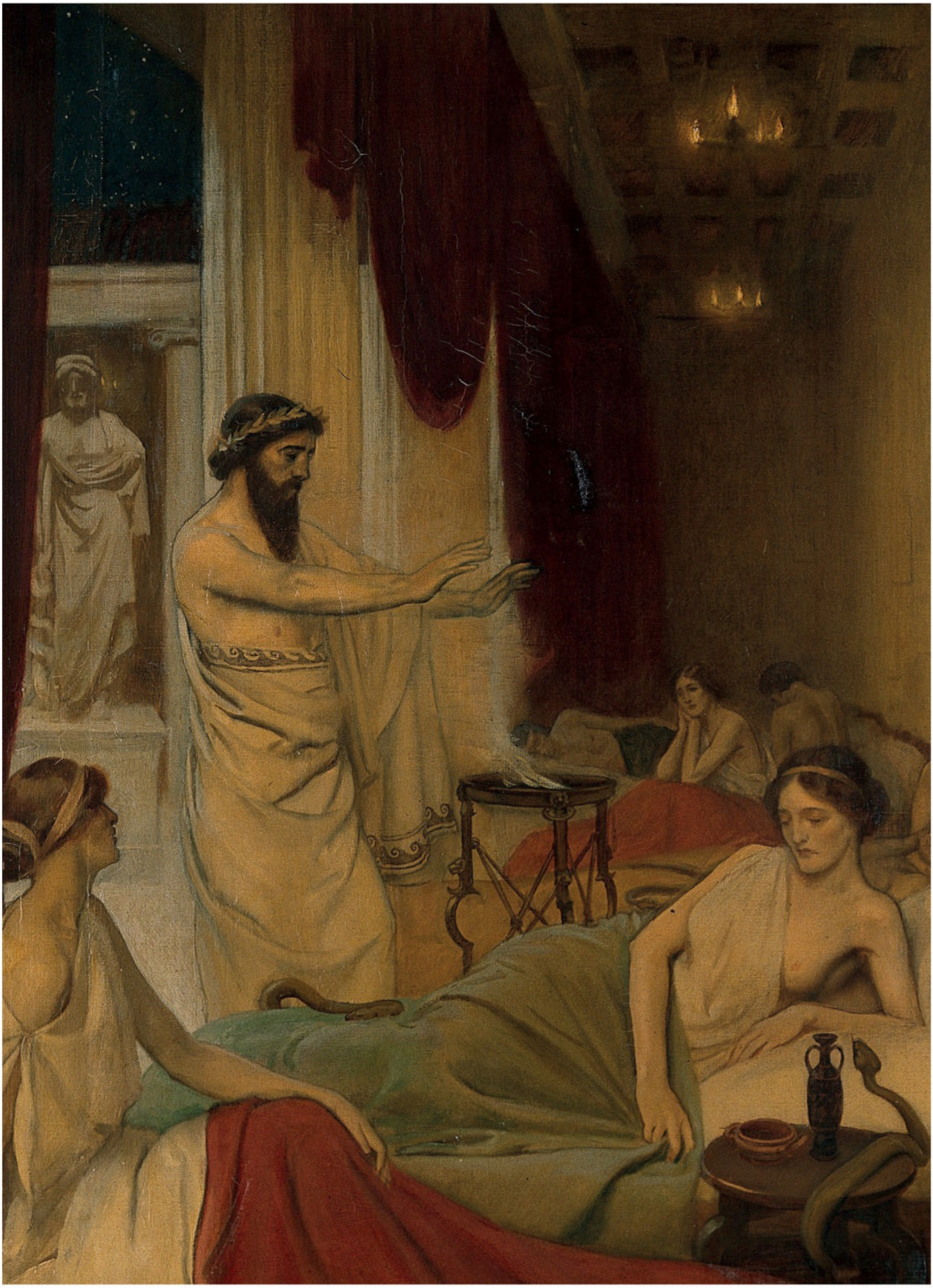
> *Asclepius was so apt a student that he could even revive the dead*

DREAMING TO SOME PURPOSE

Unlike modern science, the ancient Greeks took dreams seriously – although there are signs that contemporary research into dreams and sleep may be coming round to their viewpoint.[3] How seriously can be seen in the remains of hundreds of asclepieia that have been discovered throughout Greece. These healing temples were dedicated to the hero/god Asclepius, son of Apollo. Asclepius is the great healer, a miracle worker who is associated with the Egyptian Imhotep, another powerful medicine man. Asclepius had learned the healing arts from the centaur Chiron – who had been taught them himself by Asclepius's dad, Apollo. In another version of the story, after showing it some courtesy, a snake licked Asclepius's ear and taught him the secret knowledge. Snakes were sacred to Asclepius and during the centres' heyday (circa 350 BC), a non-poisonous variety (*Zamenis longisisimus*), the so-called Aesculapian snake, was given freedom of the asclepieia.

However he learned his craft, Asclepius was so apt a student that he could even revive the dead. In one version of the story, Asclepius sees a snake place a herb on a dead snake, which brings it back to life. He then uses the same herb to revive the Cretan Prince Glaucus. Other mortals received similar treatment. Such expertise, however, led to trouble. Hades, lord of the underworld, complained to Zeus that Asclepius was stealing souls from him, and Zeus himself was apparently concerned with overpopulation, so he killed Asclepius with a thunderbolt. In one version of the myth, through the intercession of Apollo, Asclepius is transported to the heavens, where he remains today as the constellation Ophiuchus, the Serpent Bearer. Images of Asclepius invariably show him with a staff around which a serpent is coiled. The same symbol is used by doctors and pharmacies today, and it isn't surprising that another Asclepius, the student of Hermes Trismegistus, is associated with a similar staff, the hermetic caduceus.

Unlike his father Apollo, a solar god, Asclepius is a chthonic god, a deity of the underworld. For the Greeks, the earth and what lay below were associated with fertility, yet also with death. Womb and tomb were the entrance and exit to this world. But it was also from the soil and sacred springs, found at every asclepieion, that life and health came forth. And the association of dreams and the underworld, of sleep and night, is clear. When travelling, one is usually keen to stay awake so as not to miss the sights. On this trip, however, we went out of our way to fall asleep.



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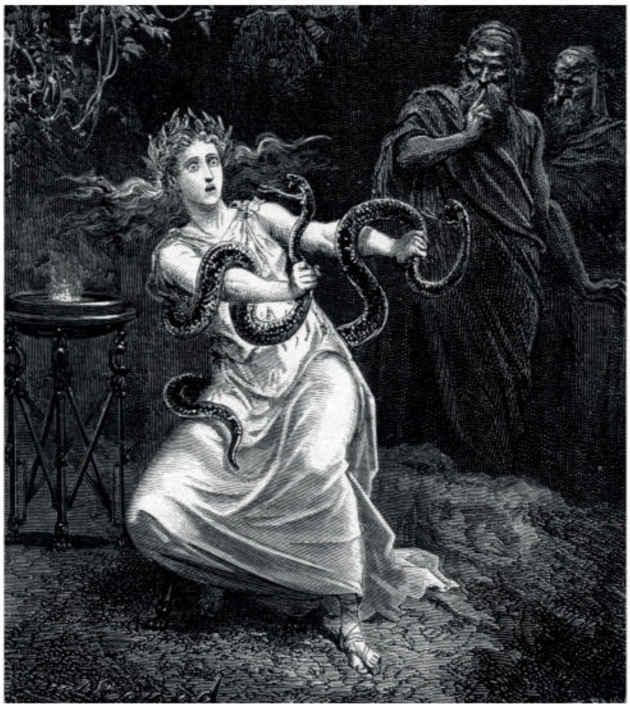


CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Sleepers among the stones at the Amphiareion of Oropos. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Pythoness of the Oracle at Delphi.

DREAM TOURISTS

After meeting at the parking lot to the Athens Acropolis – where I caught a view of the Parthenon – our 20-person crew, a congenial, intelligent co-ed bunch, made up of Russians, Welsh, a Pole, some Yanks and assorted Brits (with artists, musicians, podcasters, witches and a classics scholar among them), piled into the coach and we headed for Delphi, the first of our major sites. But along the way we made a stop at the Amphiareion of Oropos.

Amphiaraus was, like Asclepius, a hero/god, a healer and interpreter of dreams. He was the grandson of the great seer Melampus, and like Asclepius was one of the Argonauts. He also took part in the fatal expedition of the Seven Against Thebes, even though he knew that it was doomed. It is said that Zeus gave him his foresight. It did him little good. He escaped Periclymenus, the son of Poseidon, when the earth opened up and swallowed him. He thus became a chthonic god, and a cult grew up around him.

The sanctuary the coach pulled up to on a hot afternoon was dated to the late 5th century BC. My impression was that it wasn't one of the more popular sites; we were practically the only ones there. We ambled among the quiet remains of a temple and theatre, commenting as much upon the smell of pine and the brilliant red poppies as on the ancient stones, while Sarah gave us the background to the place. According to the 2nd century AD Greek traveller Pausanias, after purifying themselves at the sacred spring – a requirement at all asclepieia – a supplicant to Amphiaraus sacrificed a ram and then lay upon its skin and awaited a dream. Amphiaraus was an interpreter of dreams and his priests carried on the tradition, instructing supplicants as to the best treatment for their ailments. There was also a well into which visitors tossed coins and made wishes; those of us with loose change did the same. The Greek sun was hot. While some of the group picked herbs and took note of the abundant local flora – my own expertise in this area embarrassingly nil – I took shelter in the shade of what was left of the proscenium of the theatre, and tried to get an overall impression. The sunlight itself told me I was in Greece. But the next stop on our itinerary brought the point home.

Amphiaraus was a hero-god, a healer and an interpreter of dreams

ORACLES AND NIGHTMARES

The ancient Greeks considered Delphi, on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, overlooking the Gulf of Corinth, the centre of the world (see **FT181:48-50**). It was the site of the omphalos, or "world navel." The story is that Zeus let loose two eagles, one in the far west, the other in the far east: their point of contact in their return flights marked the world's centre. The site dates back to at least the 8th century BC and its oracle, the Pythoness, dedicated to Apollo, was the most famous in the ancient world. Several "Sacred Wars" were fought over several centuries for its possession, and until its decline following the rise of Christianity and the closure of all pagan temples by Roman Emperor Theodosius in the 4th century AD (Greece having been long subsumed by Rome by then), no important decision regarding Greek social or political life was taken without consulting the oracle. The visit of one famous Greek, Socrates, whom the oracle called the wisest man of all, is however apocryphal. The father of philosophy did not importune the oracle himself, but a friend did go and ask about him.

The oracle originally belonged to Gaia, Mother Earth, and the omphalos was protected by an enormous serpent, Pythia. Apollo, seeing Pythia as a threat to mankind, killed the serpent and took possession of the oracle. The woman who later proclaimed the oracle came to be known as the Pythoness (see **FT361:19**). She sat on a tripod in a sunken chamber and is said to have chewed laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), which was sacred to Apollo, and gone into a trance. Laurel contains no psychoactive ingredient – at least none has been found in it – and other substances have been suggested, such as cannabis and opium, that would induce an altered state of consciousness. Natural gases emitted from the earth may have done the trick (see **FT127:21**). "Python" derives from the Greek pyth , "to rot", and the intoxicating fumes were thought to rise from the decaying body of the slain serpent. The Pythoness's words were then interpreted by the priests, much as the asclepiads, the name of the healers at the dream temples, did their patients' dreams.

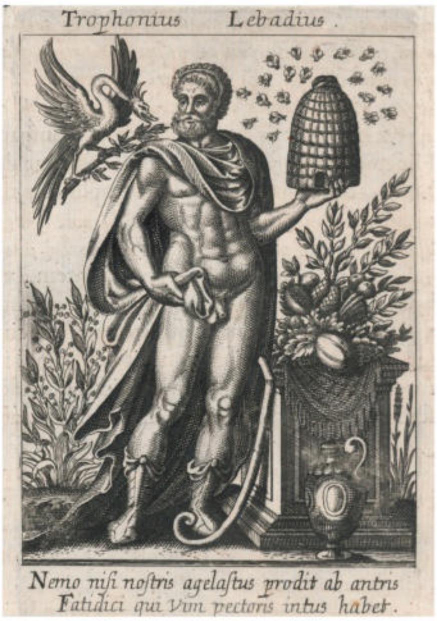
Prior to delivering her vision, the oracle and those consulting her bathed in the sacred Castalian spring, purifying themselves. They then gave sacrifice according to their means, while the Pythoness drank

PHOTOS: GARY LACHMAN

ABOVE LEFT: The Temple of Apollo at Delphi. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Cave of Trophonius. **BELOW:** The hero-god Trophonius, said to have built the Temple at Delphi

from the Cassotis spring, and then sat upon her tripod. Neither spring remains today – we had to settle for bottled water – nor does the tripod, although a replica is in the site's museum, along with a Roman replica of the original omphalos. But near the remains of the Temple of Apollo we engaged in one of many dream incubation rituals that punctuated the trip. We did not chew laurel or anything else – at least I didn't – but in a relatively secluded spot (Delphi was crowded), we stretched out on the ground as comfortably as we could, while Danny burnt resinous herbs and slowly talked us into a dreamy reverie. I can't now remember what came to me; my dream recall, usually good, was below par during the trip. But from what I gathered from some of the others, the experiment was considered a success.

Beneficial dreams, however, were not the only item on our travel menus. There was, for example, the Cave of Trophonius, also known as the "cave of nightmares," the next stop on our journey. Although not a name on many lips these days, in its time the site was famous. Back then, to tell a frightened friend that he looked "as if he had visited the cave of Trophonius" was common; even as late as the 18th century, Francis Dashwood's Hellfire Club had their own "Cave of Trophonius," done up to accommodate their satanic revels.


Trophonius Lebadius.
Nemo niſi noſtris agelaſtus prodit ab antris
Fatidici qui Vim pectoris intus habet.

CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Like Amphiaraus, Trophonius was a hero who over time became a god. He was said to have built Apollo's temple at Delphi. One story has it that upon completing the temple, the oracle told Trophonius to do what he liked for six days, and on the seventh he would get his reward. He did, and a week later was dead. Another story has him and his brother building a treasure chamber for a king, which they later looted. The king set a trap and when his brother was caught, Trophonius cut off his brother's head so that he would not be recognised. At that point, like Amphiaraus, he was swallowed by the earth and became a chthonic god. The site became popular after the Delphic oracle told the local people, then suffering from a plague, that an unknown hero was angry at being neglected. In order to lift the plague, they must find his grave and make amends. A shepherd boy followed a swarm of bees to the cave, and within discovered a daimon, a spirit, who told him of Trophonius. Sacrifice was made to the hero, the plague vanished and a sacred site was born. Among its many visitors was the 2nd century AD Greek historian and priest at Apollo's temple in Delphi, Plutarch, and the 1st century AD "wonder worker," Apollonius of Tyana (see **FT309:17, 347:57**).

Pausanias tells us that supplicants had to live apart in a secluded house, bathe in the nearby pool and eat sacrificial meat. They were then to drink of the rivers Lethe and Mnemosyne (the waters of "forgetfulness" and "memory" in the Orphic tradition) and enter the cave. Sarah told us that the descent into the cave – no longer accessible – must have been quite an experience. Apparently one was tied by one's ankles and lowered into it, often banging one's head on rocks along the way. This, one suspects, would induce an altered state perhaps more effectively than chewing laurel.

PHOTOS: GARY LACHMAN

ABOVE: The magnificent amphiheatre at Epidavros. **BELOW:** The healing sanctuary at Epidavros, which grew to be the most extensive of Greece's asclepieia.

A PLACE OF HEALING

Epidaurus – today Epidavros – the next stop on our itinerary, and where we would spend most time, is best known for its magnificent 14,000-capacity amphitheatre, dating back to the 4th century BC. Pausanias marvelled at its acoustics, as do tourists today; they struck me as better than many venues I played at in my musician days. But in its day Epidaurus was the most celebrated asclepieion in Greece, a religious and spiritual centre that rivalled Delphi. Its Sanctuary of Asclepius drew visitors from all points of the Hellenic world, and testimonies to the asclepiad's effectiveness and cures dating to 350 BC remain carved into the marble. The site's popularity dates to the 6th century BC, when the earlier hilltop sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas, a form of Apollo as healer, proved too small, and so a larger structure was built. It would become the most extensive of Greece's asclepieia, along the lines of a modern major hospital, dedicated to what we today would call "alternative health."

Although the great Greek physician Hippocrates (460-377 BC) himself learned medicine at the asclepieion of Kos, an island sacred to Asclepius, he went on to develop what is known as the allopathic approach to health, treating ailments with medicines that produce the opposite effect of the illness.

> *The temple snakes did their part to persuade Asclepius to visit often*

Doctors today take the Hippocratic Oath. The way of Asclepius is that of homeopathy, or, as it is also called, the morbistic approach, treating like with like – in a sense, with a "bit of the hair of the dog that bit you". And while the allopathic approach is in the solar tradition of Apollo, the morbistic is chthonic, of the underworld.[4]

Along with the purifications, fasts, fumigations and ritual bathing required at other asclepieia, the supplicants at Epidaurus were also treated with music and drama as means of emotional catharsis. Physical exercise and athletic competitions were also part of the cure. The aim was to prompt the body's natural healing processes, to create an environment that promoted an all-round sense of well-being, much like that at many "natural health" spas today. Yet in some cases, even invasive surgery was carried out. Surgeons used opium to bring about a deep enkoimesis, "induced sleep," so that the patient would not feel the pain. These treatments were carried out in places separate from the main hall, or enkoimeteria, a kind of dormitory, where those seeking a healing dream would lie on low benches while the priests lulled them into sleep, and the temple snakes did their part to persuade Asclepius to visit them. Often enough, he would, and the appearance of the god himself in their

PHOTOS: GARY LACHMAN

ABOVE LEFT: A moment out of time at the Tomb of Agamemnon. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The group's final stop was Eleusis, which still carries a whiff of the ancient Mysteries.

dream was more times than not a sufficient cure for their ailment. So widespread was the reputation of Epidaurus that even after its demise following the rise of Christianity, it remained known as a Christian place of healing; the Christian symbols, carved into the ancient stones, that Sarah pointed out, gave evidence of that.

MOMENTS OUT OF TIME

Epidaurus was the last of the asclepieia on our itinerary, but on the drive to Athens to catch our return flights, we were lucky enough to fit in two more ancient sites: Mycenæ and Eleusis (today Elefsina).

Mycenæ was the home of the heroes of the Iliad; Helen of Troy, the "face that launched a thousand ships," was married to its king, Menelaus, before being abducted by Paris, son of King Priam of Troy, thus starting the Trojan War. I had always been fascinated with the story of Heinrich Schlieman, the 19th century German businessman turned amateur archæologist and his remarkable discoveries at Troy – Hissarlik, in Turkey – and Mycenæ. Among these was the fabulous golden Mask of Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus, who led the Greeks against the Trojans, a replica of which could be seen in the museum. Schlieman read the Iliad as a boy and was convinced that Troy was no legend, as scholars claimed, but really existed; he later used his fortune to prove that his intuition was right.

Legend has it that Mycenæ was founded by Perseus, slayer of Medusa, who hired the Cyclopes to build walls with stones so great that no human could lift them. As I passed through the famous Lion Gate I understood why Mycenæ's architecture came to be called "cyclopean." The stones indeed were enormous. Under the hot sun, in glaring daylight, here was another Greece, one of battle, tragedy, and adventure. Homer – if indeed he was a single individual – wrote down the Iliad sometime in the 8th century BC. But the poem had long been recited in an oral tradition before that, and the events it depicts took place centuries earlier. As we explored the site, and later, at the so-called Tomb of Agamemnon nearby – a marvellous beehive tholos, or rounded structure, with remarkable acoustics of its own – I was struck with the realisation that these people really existed, that the battles, dramas and tragedies they were involved in really happened. It was, we could say, a moment out of time, I had managed to pluck with my imagination.

Eleusis, our last stop, seemed an appropriate end to the trip. Along with Delphi, it is probably the best known of Greece's ancient sites. It was here that the Eleusinian Mysteries took place, a religious festival of initiation that dominated the Greek mind for centuries, beginning with Mycenæ in 1600 BC and continuing until the closure of the pagan temples by Theodosius in 392 AD. Soon after that, it was sacked by the Goth king, Alaric, and the last of its hierophants murdered.

The mysteries are so-called because those who participated in them were sworn upon penalty of death to remain silent about them. We get some idea of them from classical sources. They re-enacted the myth of the goddess Demeter's search for her daughter Persephone, after her abduction by Hades. After a long search, and with some help from Zeus, Demeter is able to retrieve Persephone from Hades. But because he tricked Persephone into eating some pomegranate seeds, she is forced to return to the underworld for several months each year. Her return to the surface symbolises the revival of life in the spring, and the promise of eternal life in the afterworld.

Each year, a huge procession along what was called the Sacred Way, started from Athens, gathering more supplicants as it did, and made its way to Eleusis. There the candidates for initiation went through a nine day series of rituals, fasts and purification. The culmination of the event was the drinking of the kykeon (see **FT325:17**), a beverage whose exact contents still remain unclear, although given that its effect was to make the gods visible, many have suggested that some psychoactive ingredient of some kind must have been present. We don't know, but as Sarah guided us through our own imaginative identification with those who did, visualising ourselves as participants in the initiation, I know that some brief whiff of the mysterious came to me and I suspect to the others too.

NOTES

1 For more on "dream incubation", see **FT178:30-35, 291:36-39**.

2 Gary Lachman, *Dreaming Ahead of Time* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2022).

3 See Sidarta Ribeiro, *The Oracle of Night* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

4 Anthony Stevens, *Ariadne's Clue* (London: Allen Lane, 1998) p. 278.

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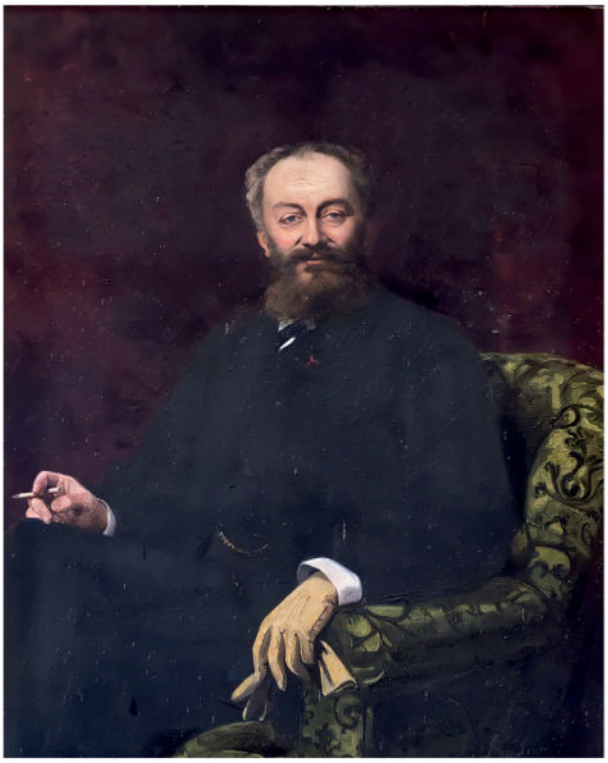
EMPEROR OF THE NIGHT

THE MAN WHO INVENTED LUCID DREAMING

PHIL BAKER reassesses the work of the Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys, whose pioneering approach to his dream life resulted in the first book to explore the human ability to shape and direct our own dreams.



LEFT: A portrait of the Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys. **FACIG PAGE:** The frontispiece of Hervey’s classic book *Dreams and How to Guide Them*, 1867.

The “Emperor of the Night”, as he has been grandly called,[1] the Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys was the great pioneer of “lucid dreaming”: to be aware, while you are fully asleep, that you are dreaming, with the possibility of deliberately directing the dream for recreational, psychological or spiritual exploration. Today it is an area of great interest, but it was unknown as a coherent subject in the West before the arrival of Hervey’s classic work *Dreams and How to Guide Them* (*Les reves et les moyens de les diriger)*, published anonymously in 1867. For many years it was a rare and legendary book: Freud knew of it, but failed to find a copy, while the great Surrealist André Breton was fascinated by it, although he never seems to have achieved a lucid dream.

A minor French aristocrat and scholar of Chinese, Hervey started to keep a dream diary from the age of 13; over the first five years, this ran to 22 volumes. Before long he found his interest in his dreams led to “often being aware while sleeping of my true situation… and thus subsequently of keeping enough control over my ideas to guide their course in whatever direction I wanted to give them.” This is what is now known as lucid dreaming, although Hervey doesn’t use the word in this context: when he says, as he often does, that his dreams are “*lucide*”, he means clear and vivid, and what we would call lucid dreams he calls “dreams in which I was aware of my situation”.

The consensus before, and even after, Hervey was that conscious awareness while dreaming was an impossible contradiction. Mainstream 20th-century philosophy would assert that to say “I am dreaming” is as illogical as “I am unconscious” or “I am dead”. Instead, as we now know, it is no more illogical than to say “I am scuba diving”.

Hervey found that for him – potentially for anyone – full awareness need not be lost in sleep. This enabled him to defeat a recurrent nightmare of monsters that chased him through an endless series of rooms: once aware that he was dreaming, he was able to study the leading monster more calmly (it “somewhat resembled one of those bristling and grimacing sculpted demons one sees in cathedral porches”) and watch it “hissing and prancing in a manner that verged on the comic once it was no longer terrifying”. The nightmares stopped.

IT ENABLED HIM TO DEFEAT A RECURRENT NIGHTMARE OF MONSTERS THAT CHASED HIM THROUGH A SERIES OF ROOMS

Hervey also made ingenious experiments using the power of association. He waltzed with two women, keeping a separate piece of music for each of them, and then found he duly dreamed of one or the other when a servant played their particular tunes from musical boxes near his sleeping head. In another experiment he used a particular scent while on a holiday in the mountains and found that by having some sprinkled on his pillow, at a future date he didn’t choose or know, he dreamed himself back in the mountain scenery.

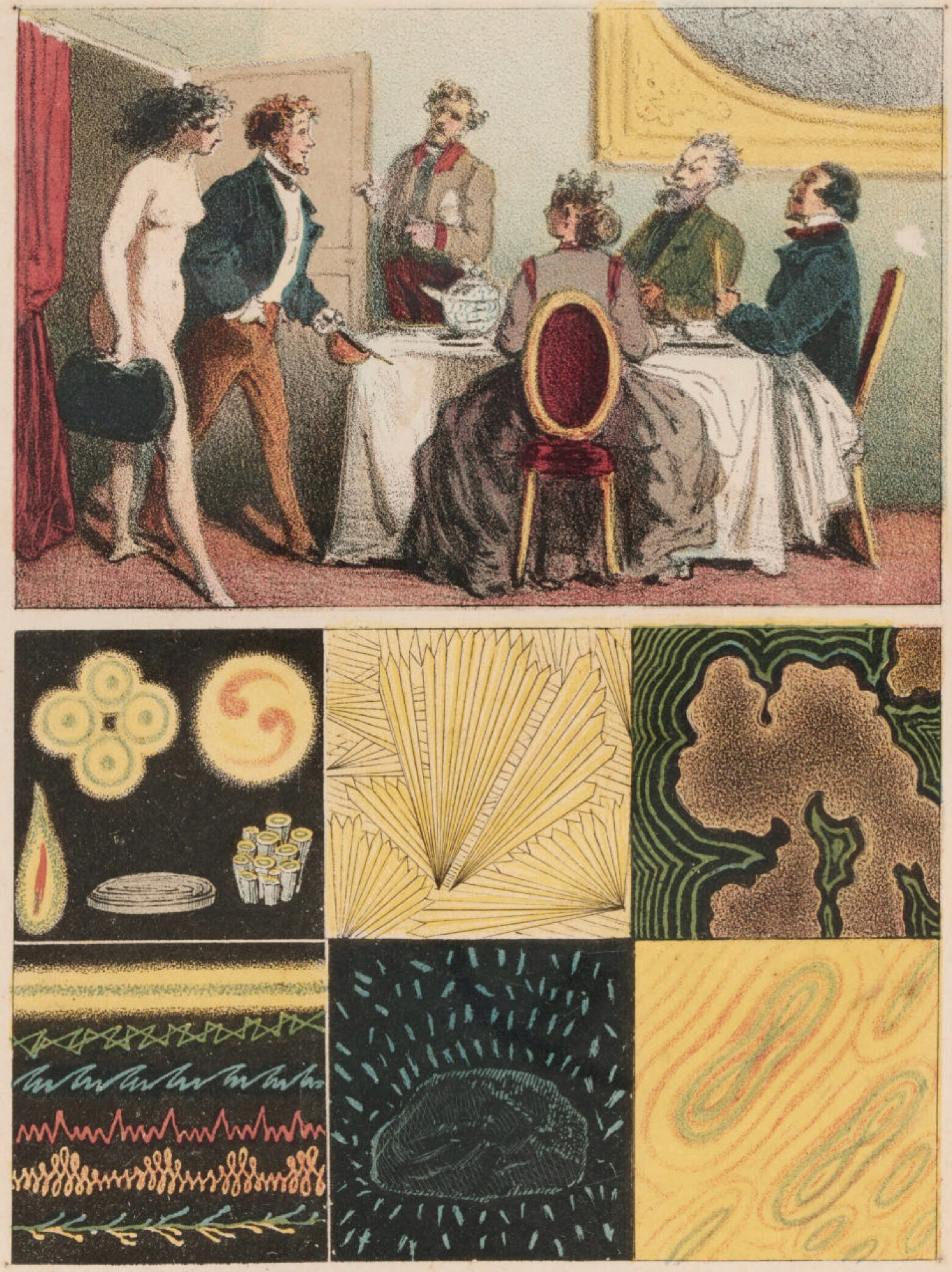
These experiments might now make us think of Ivan Pavlov and Marcel Proust, 40 or 50 years later. Around 1900, Russian psychologist Pavlov taught dogs to associate the ringing of a bell with food until it became a conditioned reflex, cutting their faces to measure saliva flow (he also experimented with orphan children, surgically modifying their faces as well). How much happier and more ethical the experiments of Hervey on himself and with a musical box and some scent. As for Proust, the taste of a madeleine biscuit dipped in tea took him back by association not to a mountain holiday but to long-ago tea with his aunt, in a sudden time jump where he recaptured the whole vanished scene.

ONEIRONAUTS

Lucidity since Hervey has made extraordinary progress. He saw it as an important new subject, “applicable to the progress of science as well as to the inspirations of fantasy… I have emphasised more than once, in addressing doctors and psychologists, the interest that this method must offer them.” But the extent of lucid dreaming today might still surprise him.

There were flashes of it reported before Hervey. There seem to be fleeting references to dream awareness in Aristotle, St

LES RÈVES.



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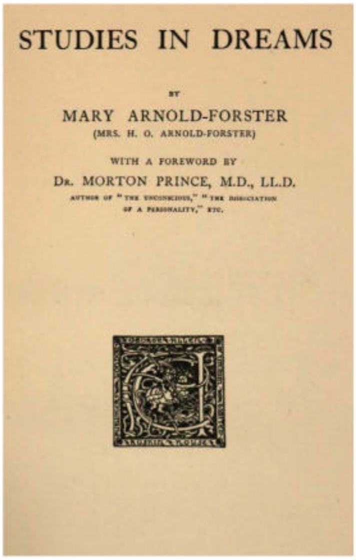
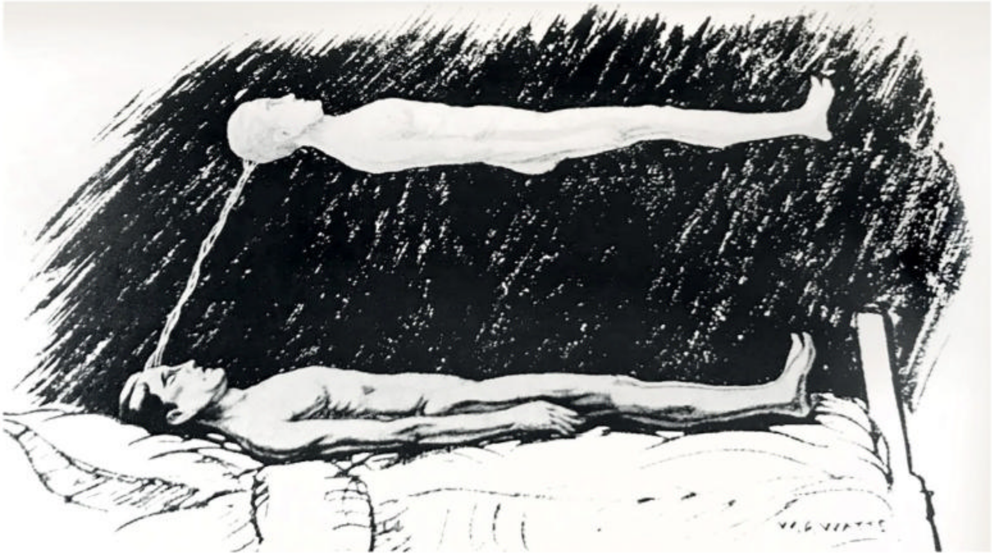


STUDIES IN DREAMS

BY

MARY ARNOLD-FORSTER
(MRS. H. O. ARNOLD-FORSTER)

WITH A FOREWORD BY
DR. MORTON PRINCE, M.D., LL.D.
AUTHOR OF "THE UNCONSCIOUS," "THE DISSOCIATION
OF A PERSONALITY," ETC.

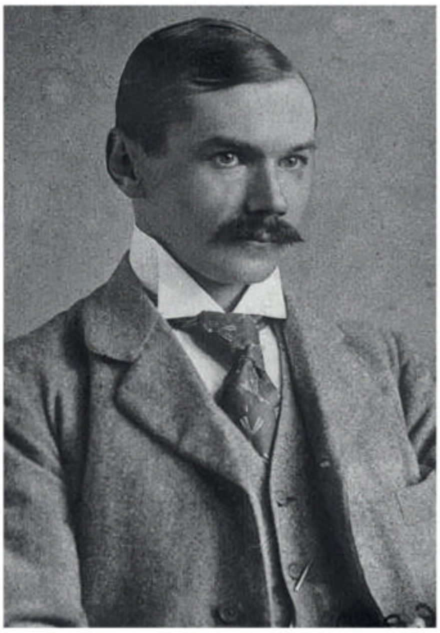


ABOVE LEFT: The title page of Mary Arnold-Foster's *Studies in Dreams*, 1921. **ABOVE RIGHT:** An illustration from Sylvan *Muldoon's Projection of the Astral Body*, 1929. **BELOW:** The prolific dreamer Frederik van Eeden, who first used the term "lucid dreaming" in its modern sense in 1913.

Augustine and Samuel Pepys, and certainly in 18th-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, who suffered from nightmares: "Sometimes hanging over a frightful precipice… sometimes pursued for my life, and stopped by a wall, or by a sudden loss of all strength; sometimes ready to be devoured by a wild beast." He resolved to remind himself he was dreaming, and finally succeeded. "I effected it at last, and have often, when I was sliding over a precipice into the abyss, recollected that it was all a dream, and boldly jumped down. The effect of this commonly was, that I immediately awoke. But I awoke calm and intrepid, which I thought a great acquisition."

Hervey's book is still the first great Western landmark in "oneironautics," as the subject has more recently been called (from the Greek for dream, *oneiros*). The next landmark comes with the dream accounts of Frederik Van Eeden, who first uses the term "lucid dreams" in the modern sense in 1913, when "the sleeper remembers day-life and his own condition, reaches a state of perfect awarenesss, and is able to direct his attention, and to attempt different acts of free volition." [2] Van Eeden had over 350 lucid dreams between 1898 and 1912. In the first of them he floated through woodland, noticing how the perspective of the trees changed as he moved past, and thought while still dreaming that his waking imagination could never invent anything as intricate as the perspective movement of the twigs. Van Eeden is a beautiful writer in the same vein as Hervey, but with an extra strangeness of his own: when he has what he calls his "demoniacal dreams" he suggests that instead of the unconscious – which he doesn't believe in – his dreams involve real "intelligent beings of a very low moral order".

The pleasure of lucid dreaming seems to inspire pleasurable writing, and there is more in the work of Mary Arnold-Forster and her 1921 book *Studies in Dreams*. She wants to remind readers of "the measure, too often overlooked, that is added by our dreams to the sum of life's happiness." Even in quite ordinary dreams, she writes, "a curious sense of pleasure and well-being seems to pervade them that is out of all proportion to the incidents that happen in their course." She is not fully lucid, but she finds she can stop nightmares using her awareness, as she discusses in her chapter on 'Dream Control': "Remember this is a dream." This often led to waking, although in one case she wanted to get out of danger but to remain asleep to obtain what she thought was real wartime knowledge. She has a particular flair for flying dreams, which include flying along Oxford Street at about bus height, and flying around inside the British Museum, gliding up the main staircase.

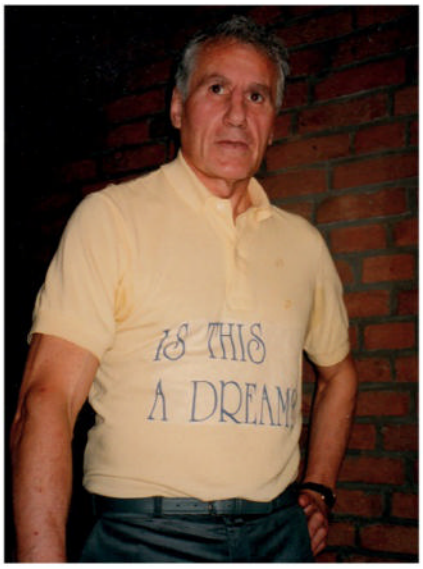


There was a related activity or discipline practised by occultists in the form of 'astral projection', well known to the Victorian occult society The Order of the Golden Dawn. A popular part of the Western occult tradition, astral projection was often said to involve leaving the body to fly in a soul-like form, or transferring consciousness to one's "body of light", a precursor of the later interest in Out of Body Experiences. The most impressive lucid dreamer in this tradition is probably Oliver Fox (pseudonym of Hugh Callaway, 1885-1949), with his 1939 book *Astral Projection*. His dreams often took the form of out-of-the-body flying experiences which he believed were 'real', and he was influenced by the American astral projection writer Sylvan Muldoon and his 1929 book *The Projection of the Astral Body*. It is a popular but potentially murky area, leading to the 1970s best-seller *Journeys Out of the Body* by Robert A Monroe and also influencing Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard.

DREAM RESEARCH

The subject was put on a more philosophical footing with Celia Green's 1968 book *Lucid Dreams*. She collected the work of other dreamers and made it better known, including that of Hervey, Fox, psychic researcher FWH Myers and French writer Yves Delage. Delage was going blind, but enjoyed full vision in his dreams, and he also enjoyed taking suicidal risks, particularly throwing himself from tall buildings. Eventually he gave up doing this, in case he made a terrible mistake while he was in fact awake.

Green's later book *Lucid Dreaming: The Paradox of Consciousness During Sleep* again rescued some impressive dreamers from obscurity, including Harold von Moers-Messmer in the 1930s. Confirming Hervey's insistence that logical thought is possible in dreams, Moers-Messmer reports dream thinking more rigorous than most of us manage while awake. "I think: 'The sun is now standing vertically at the equator, so here it must be at an angle of about 45 degrees. Therefore if my shadow is not equal to my own height, I must be dreaming'. I look at it: it is about 30cm



ABOVE LEFT: Dr Keith Hearne with his Prototype Dream Machine. **ABOVE RIGHT:** German psychologist Paul Tholey devised his 'reflection technique' of inducing lucid dreams through constantly asking, while awake, "Is this a dream?" **BELOW:** French writer Yves Delage was going blind, but enjoyed full vision in his dreams.

long. It costs me a fair effort to regard the whole almost dazzlingly bright landscape with all its villages as an illusion."

Green's first book inspired British researcher Keith Hearne to conduct the first sleep-laboratory studies into lucid dreams (see **FT458:16-18**). In 1975 Hearne was working with Alan Worsley, a naturally lucid dreamer who ran a second-hand shop in Hull. Hearne wanted the dreamer to communicate from within the dream; he tried mechanical devices with no success, but he realised that in the REM (rapid eye movement) stage of sleep the eyes are not inhibited by the paralysis that affects the rest of the body, so a dreamer might be able to communicate by moving his or her eyes. Finally, on 12 April 1975, it worked: "It was fantastic!" he remembered in a conversation he had with lucid dream writer Charlie Morley. "I was overwhelmed by it. It was like getting signals from another world…"

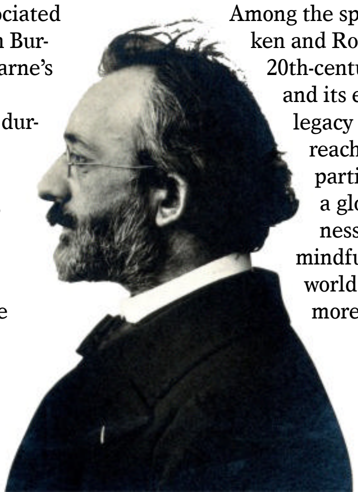
It later struck him that it was on 12 April (in 1961) that man first went into space, when Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth and kept in radio contact, and now "I was receiving the first messages from inner space!" Already proclaimed International Day of Human Space Flight, the date of 12 April has been suggested as "Lucid Dreaming Day", like the "Bicycle Day" anniversary of Albert Hoffman's first LSD trip.

Hearne developed a "Dream Machine" (not to be confused with the flickering strobe "dream machine" associated with Brion Gysin and William Burroughs; see **FT261:38-42**). Hearne's device monitors the sleeper's breathing, which accelerates during REM sleep, and gives the sleeper feedback cues in the form of small electric shocks, which can be recognised within the dream and trigger lucidity. Among other things, it has had some success in the treatment of nightmares.

> THE DEVICE ALERTED THE DREAMER WITH FEEDBACK IN THE FORM OF FLASHES RATHER THAN SHOCKS

On 13 January 1981 at Stanford University, California, Stephen LaBerge achieved similar results, receiving signals from a dreamer, apparently without knowing the work of Hearne. LaBerge worked with more orthodox scientific rigour and soon went on to become by far the leading figure in the field. LaBerge devised an electrical device of his own, which alerted the dreamer with feedback in the form of flashes rather than shocks, marketed commercially as the 'Nova Dreamer' (at one time, it was regularly advertised in *FT*). More recent developments in the field include the use of 'supplements' such as galantamine, explored by Thomas Yuschak.[3]

The subject has come a long way since Hervey, but his milestone contribution was recognised and celebrated in France by the lucid dreaming association Oniros, which organised a commemorative event in 1992. Among the speakers, Carolus den Blanken and Roger Ripert both noted the 20th-century predominance of Freud and its effect in marginalising the legacy of Hervey, and made far-reaching assessments: Ripert in particular saw the potential for a global evolution of consciousness towards an all-round mindfulness that could make the world both socially fairer and more ecologically aware.[4]



UNCONSCIOUS POWERS

Unlike the Freudian unconscious, grounded in sexual repression, the unconscious that still operates in lucid dreaming is the creative genius of unconscious thinking: not the unconscious that has an Oedipus complex, but the unconscious that writes Kubla Khan. Like Coleridge's account of the dream-composition of his poem, and Robert Louis Stevenson finding the scenario of Jekyll and Hyde in a dream, there are many familiar examples of great dream-thinking. Mendeleev saw the periodic table of the elements fall into place in a dream (**FT380:56-57**), and Elias Howe finally invented the sewing machine after long and unsuccessful conscious thinking: he then dreamed he was going to be executed for his failure; when he noticed the men guarding him had spears pierced with a hole at the sharp end, and that was the breakthrough in the design.

Hervey marvels at the creative power of this unconscious, without having the benefit of the word. Many readers, he says, "must have asked themselves how, not being architects, or sculptors, or painters, they have been able to see in their dreams remarkable buildings, and paintings or statues of rare perfection, seemingly created by the power of their imagination alone. The fact that a man who would not know how, in a waking state, to draw the least portrait or sketch a simple house, can by virtue of sleep suddenly become capable of inventing splendid palaces or composing masterly paintings is a crucial fact, an astonishing fact, and we should pay attention to it."

He mentions the solving chess problems and composing of music (Tartini's 'Devil's Trill' sonata), and from his own experience the extraordinary reality of characters and landscapes, like his dream path to a chateau:

"Here now are two paths lying before me. The one on the right seems to plunge into thick woods; the one on the left leads to a

BRÉAU-sans-NAPPE. - Le Château
Lib. A. Bonteoue, Dourdan (S.-et-O.)

LES RÊVES
MOYENS DE LES DIRIGER
OBSERVATIONS PRATIQUES
PARIS

ABOVE LEFT: Hervey's family had a chateau at Breau, near Paris, which figures on the original cover design of his book (right). **BELOW:** Hervey's sepulchre in Montparnasse lists his many titles and honours, but makes no mention of his achievements in the world of dreaming.

kind of ruined manor house… I therefore take the path on the left, I dismount at the entry to a highly picturesque drawbridge and, for several moments while I still sleep, I examine with great attention an infinity of great and small details: ogival vaults, sculpted stones, eroded ironwork, cracks and deformations of the walls, admiring the meticulous precision with which all this is painted before my mind's eye."

Hervey's conscious awareness does not make this larger setting he is moving through any less a product of the unconscious in the full sense. "To follow and master all the phases of a dream is something I have never achieved, nor have I even attempted it," he writes: it would take all the wonder and adventure away, and fortunately it is not possible. Taking this path or that path, or even shifting to witness a different scene altogether, we are still moving consciously through the almost mystical, neurological landscapes of our much larger unconscious creation.

REALITY CHECKS

When it comes to methods of lucid dreaming, it is fair to say Hervey over-estimates how easily anyone can do it. Keith Hearne was well advanced in his research without having had a lucid dream himself (after Worsley's breakthrough signalling in April 1975, Hearne had his own first lucid dream in July 1976), and Stephen LaBerge took two-and-half years to learn to dream lucidly at will.

After Hervey's simple methods – keeping a journal; the use of association; and the knowledge that dreaming is thinking, so changing your thoughts changes your dream – more recent dreamers all agree on the importance of remembering and tuning in with your dreams, and for this keeping a dream diary is still the primary method. On top of this comes a motivation to dream lucidly, and a belief that it will sooner or later happen.

DREAMERS HAVE SOUGHT TO INTERACT WITH ARCHETYPES OR FIND VISIONARY ADVICE FROM DREAM FIGURES

The next step is awareness of the dream-like qualities and distinctive signs by which we often recognise dreams, with their incongruities and anomalies. Light switches never seem to work (when I was a child that was part of false awakening dreams, when I 'woke' and tried to turned the light on, only to remain in darkness, which then became a nightmare). Print is difficult to read, and shifts about. We might visit recurrent places, perhaps a house we used to live in, or recurrent fictional districts and sites; the same seaside café, or the same non-existent part of town. Jumping often leads to slow descents, and flying is possible. Investigating these "dream signs" more actively, they can serve as tests or reality checks. And, in fact, by the time we are investigating if we are dreaming with any degree of real doubt or possibility, then we probably are.

My own experiences of lucid dreaming have been modest. In my last fully lucid dream I was in my present flat, realised I was dreaming, and flew around inside like a fish swimming in a tank. Since then, I have often been aware that I am dreaming, and pleasurably, but without the extra volition to change the dream. At times I've felt a dream was boring and known I could just 'beam myself up' into waking, but – further from full lucidity – I have been reluctant to do this for fear of upsetting or bewildering the dream people, lest they feel snubbed or disturbed when I disappear. More lucidly, I was talking to a man in a dream second-hand bookshop but the dream was going nowhere, and I realised I could just leave it without hurting his feelings, because the man and his whole shop were 'just a dream' of my own creation. But what I should have done, of course, is left the shop and gone somewhere more interesting…

Other dreamers have been more gifted, and in pursuit of greater things. Erotic encounters have been a chosen activity of many dreamers, including Patricia Garfield, who has given glowing accounts in her books *Creative Dreaming* and *Pathway to Ecstasy*. Dreamers have sought to make peace with people in their past, interact with Jungian archetypes, and find valid or even visionary advice from dream figures, like meeting an internal guru.

More down-to-earth benefits include treatment for phobias and PTSD. Surprisingly, practising physical skills in dreams seems to improve those skills in reality; in the neat comparison of Stephen LaBerge,

LEFT: Surrealist André Breton owned a copy of Hervey's vanishingly rare book, but seems to have enjoyed little success in inducing lucid dreams himself.

lucid dreams can act as a "flight simulator" for waking life. This has been researched particularly in the field of sport, and training in dreams was a particular interest of Paul Tholey, a German professor of sport psychology. His other great contribution to the field was a thoroughgoing use of "reality checking". Tholey suggests we should ask "Am I dreaming?" in daily life, five or 10 times a day, so that the habit or awareness carries over into our dreaming. More than that, this reality checking can become a pleasure in itself: an acutely alive sensation of mindfulness, overlapping with mindfulness in the Buddhist sense.

The connection with Buddhism has been made by several writers on lucid dreaming, and there is a long tradition of lucidity in Tibetan Buddhism, where it is known as 'dream yoga'.

When Hervey confronts his monsters as nothing more than his own mental creations, it is a rediscovery of the dream yoga principle in the celebrated Tibetan Book of the Dead, as it is popularly known in the West. The most famous passages, at least here, involve realising the frightening visions and "wrathful deities" seen after death are only the thought-forms of one's own mind.

SURREALISM AND DREAMS

Along with Buddhism, Surrealism has an intrinsic affinity with lucid dreaming, and one man more than any other kept Hervey's memory alive during his mid-20th century neglect. André Breton, the Pope of Surrealism, opens his 1932 book *The Communicating Vessels* (*Les Vases Communicants*) with Hervey. The title image is a scientific experiment where the fluid in two connected vessels reaches an equal balance: metaphorically, the balance between waking life and dream, seen as the central project of Surrealism itself – the reconciliation of waking and dreaming into a new higher reality, a "surreality".

Despite all that, there seems to be no evidence Breton ever managed to dream lucidly. In the Surrealist group's discussions on sexuality he asks "whether one can voluntarily introduce masturbatory or other desires into the dream," immediately confessing: "To my great regret, I don't believe it is possible to make waking images or desires continue into the dream. I have tried many times."[5]

Salvador Dalí claimed more success in his 1948 book *Fifty Secret of Magic Craftsmanship*, when he offers "rules for controlling your dreams." Using association, he suggests having perfume poured on your pillow while you sleep, or having a particular tune played quietly. This is too close to Hervey to be a coincidence, and if Dalí knew of Hervey's book during the years of its extreme rarity, it must be through Breton: they were Surrealist comrades in the early 1930s, before Breton excommunicated him from the group.

Breton not only owned the book but tried unsuccessfully to get it republished, and he championed Hervey in a more complicated project when he organised the Paris exhibition *Surrealism in 1947*. Breton wanted this to take the form of the successive stages of an "initiation", which included a staircase having 21 steps, modelled as the spines of books, each one further corresponding to one of the Tarot trumps. The Gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* is the Juggler, Kafka the Wheel of Fortune and Baudelaire the Pope, while the Sun, trump XIX, is Hervey de Saint-Denys.

Hervey died in 1892, after an outwardly uneventful life as an establishment academic: a China expert and translator. His contemporaries seem to have liked him, even if they didn't always take him seriously: reading slightly between the lines, he may have seemed eccentric and unworldly. He nevertheless comes across as a decent soul from his dreams, and rather concerned: among his ordinary non-lucid dreams he wants to save a man from drowning, and to save a bird from a dog, and when he sees a woman being burned at the stake he empathises so acutely he becomes her. In an even more striking instance of empathy, he sees a female apprentice being mistreated by her employer, which enrages him; after urging her to stick up for herself and hit him back, he then himself becomes the girl and hits the employer with a mallet before hitching up his hair, discarding his dress, and escaping.

Hervey's multi-volume, colour-illustrated dream diary would be one of the great curiosities of 19th-century French literature, if only it could be found. It is almost certainly lost or destroyed.

His sepulchre in Montparnasse reads "Marquis d'Hervey de St Denys": "Membre de l'Institut / Professeur au College de France / Membre de l'Academie de St Petersburg / Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur / Chevalier de Malte / Maestrante du Royaume de Valence / Grand Croix de l'Ordre Constantinien / Commandeur des Ordres de Charles III d'Espagne et de St Grégoire de Rome / Etc Etc."

His real achievement, of course, is not mentioned.

NOTES

1 David Robson, 'Emperor of the Night' ("Modern dream research is finally waking up to the research of an eccentric French nobleman"), *New Scientist*, 21 Dec 2013.

2 Frederik van Eeden, 'A Study of Dreams', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol.26, Part LXVII July 1913, p.447.

3 Thomas Yuschak, *Advanced Lucid Dreaming: The Power of Supplements* ("How to Induce High-Level Lucid Dreams & Out of Body Experiences" (Lulu/AdvancedLD, 2006).

4 Roger Ripert, 'Hommage', in *D'Hervey De Saint-Denys Vol.II: Biographie: Correspondance familiale: L'oeuvre de l'onirologue et du sinologue* (Oniros, 1995) p.286.

5 *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions 1928-1932* ed. José Pierre (London, Verso, 1992), Fifth Session, February 1928, p.71.

PHIL BAKER is a writer and FT contributor whose books include *The Devil is a Gentleman: The Life and Times of Dennis Wheatley* (2009) and *City of the Beast: The London of Aleister Crowley* (2022). He has edited a new edition of Hervey's *Dreams and How to Guide Them*, forthcoming from Strange Attractor Press.

FORTEAN TV REVISITED

UNCUT

In the late 1990s, Channel 4 viewers experienced a television version of *Fortean Times* in which **REV LIONEL FANTHORPE** presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". In the spring of 1998, Father Lionel was back with an X-rated spin-off called *Fortean TV Uncut*. Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he faces the dark side of forteana...

Now it feels like we're getting to the main event. We have thoroughly enjoyed our run through the second series of *Fortean TV*, but perhaps we were getting a tad too comfortable, what with the jingly music, the daft costumes and the ever-encroaching sense of pantomime.

Our regular host, the Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe, reappears to present *Fortean TV Uncut*, explaining that in this short spin-off series we will be revisiting some of his favourite stories, but with extra scenes restored. Sounds harmless enough.

As will shortly become apparent, Fanthorpe was a master of understatement. There are entirely new sections in these four episodes, which I'll be picking out for discussion, but also some truly bizarre and stomach-turning imagery that simply wouldn't have made the original broadcast timeslot.

In fact, much of this material is so X-rated it's hard to believe it was ever transmitted on terrestrial television... dare we publish this exposé of *Fortean TV Uncut*?

LEFT: Our host Lionel Fanthorpe remains gloriously, inappropriately jocular despite the darker material.

OTHERS HAVE PARASITIC SIBLINGS ATTTACHED TO THEIR ARTERIES, THEIR HEADS, OR LIVING IN THEIR SCROTUM

Fortean TV
UNCUT

EPISODE 1

An Egyptian lad called Hisham Ragab plays host to an horrific foetus in fetu,[1] having absorbed his unborn twin in the womb. Fanthorpe says he's lucky: others have parasitic siblings attached to their arteries, their heads or living in their scrotum. The director presents the malformed entity in all its Cronenbergian glory, a potential person that was never to see the light of day, trapped instead in a world made from the flesh of their all-enveloping brother.

Lightening the mood, Fanthorpe claims his own hair has been "living independently" for years as he reintroduces the growing Hitler wig from Season 1 (**FT448:31**).

It's a brief respite. At Mannheim Museum, the infamous Gunter von Hagens mixes art and science with his "plastinated" corpses: donor bodies are sliced up and absurdly preserved for public display. Despite consent having been given by the adults on show, church representatives complain about the appearance of stillborn Siamese twins. There are reports of vomiting, but the *FTV* camera does not shy away. Readers might remember the widespread media interest in von Hagens. In 2002 he defied warnings from the authorities and performed the first public autopsy in the UK for 170 years, a surprisingly sober spectacle which was subsequently broadcast by Channel 4 (see **FT167:6**). Von Hagens's exhibition *Bodyworlds* and its animal spin-offs are still on tour.[2] He remains controversial, and has been dogged by accusations that he illegally procured the bodies of executed prisoners, homeless people and psychiatric patients for his ghoulish vocation. It's important to stress these allegations have been strongly rebutted, with von Hagens successfully going to court in Germany to defend himself.[3] He apparently plans to have his own body plastinated after his death.

The other new item in this episode is the stretchy skin of plasterer Gary Turner. He suffers from something called Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, which is apparently a rare collagen defect.[4] Some sufferers are considerably less lucky than Gary, ending up with serious health problems and even dying young. Gary, in contrast, stretches in return for free pints down the pub.

EPISODE 2

We start with the Abundant Life Church in Denver, Colorado. "Hell is part of your future," enthuses Pastor Keenan Roberts, who uses his horrific Hallowe'en show to deliver a gratuitously gory Gospel. Shocking scenes include a gay man withering away from AIDS and a teenage girl having an abortion. I decided not to photo-capture these sections; you can enjoy the images of Satan swooping on the aftermath of a catastrophic car accident instead.

I vividly remember this nasty stuff on the periphery of the Christian groups I used to attend in Northern Ireland, around about the time *FTV* was first broadcast. Our brand of sober Presbyterianism saw it as all a bit too camp and theatrical to take seriously, not that there were any doctrinal complaints about sinners getting a violent comeuppance. FT's own Reverend Peter Laws has also written on the evangelical Chick Tracts that employed similar terror techniques to impress disillusioned teens (see **FT389:32-39**).[5]

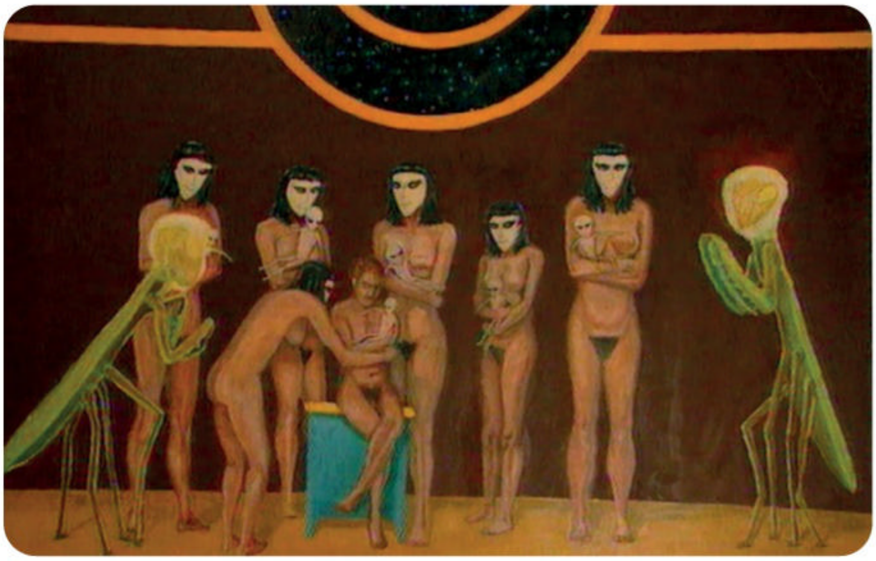
"Everybody can not be reached with a milk and cookies Gospel… we hate homosexuality, we do not hate homosexuals," Roberts states, whilst holding himself erect in a coffin. There's no doubt he fervently believes he's doing the right thing, which somehow makes it worse. At the time of broadcast 250 churches from 45 states had taken up his franchise option, and 200,000 Americans had paid to see the show.

But Fanthorpe quietly points out that this shock approach is failing to secure a lot of new souls. Tellingly, the gentle priest ends the section with a young man who describes it as "messed up" and "not helping anybody".

Guitar slinging Roberts was still flogging the concept in 2013, based out of the New Destiny Christian Center in Thornton, Colorado. A look at their website today shows he still enjoys amateur dramatics, but seems to have toned down his show and has hopefully mellowed with age.[6]

...a complete foetus containing hands, teeth....

TOP: Egyptian Hisham Ragab's unborn twin, somewhat lacking in family resemblance. **CENTRE:** The freak-show tricks of plasterer Gary Turner win him free drinks at his local pub. **ABOVE:** Some of Pastor Keenan Roberts's attempts to sicken people into salvation with his horrific Hallowe'en show.



TOP: Crowds of Shia Muslim devotees flagellate themselves with knives in Pakistan. **CENTRE:** Meanwhile in the Philippines, crucifixion is the thing; one local carpenter had been nailed up six times. **ABOVE:** Some of David Huggins's weirdly sexual alien artwork.

OUTDOING JESUS – CLEARLY A BIT OF A LIGHTWEIGHT – ONE LOCAL CARPENTER HAD BEEN CRUCIFIED A TOTAL OF SIX TIMES

Next, Fanthorpe surprises me when he says he finds "messages from above spiritually most uplifting" in a round-up of what I found some of the weaker *FTV* content and previously dismissed as pareidolia (in this instance, seeing what you want to see). It's Allah in a tomato and the Virgin Mary in a pork scratching again.

Then back to the darker stuff, this time with Shia Muslims in Pakistan undergoing a form of religious observance "officially outlawed in the Koran" [7] and flagellating themselves with knives in mourning for their revered martyr Hussain.

Children as young as eight years old participate (there is a child visible in a very brief shot). Aid workers from the Red Crescent are on hand to provide medical assistance. An apologist for this controversial ritual wrote an article in the *Guardian* following the 2008 prosecution of a man who involved his own children in the bloody spectacle.[8]

Back to San Fernando in the Philippines, and more masochistic mummery modelled on Spanish crucifixion ceremonies. Outdoing Jesus – obviously a bit of a lightweight – one local carpenter has been crucified a total of six times. Rolando Ocampo says he has finally begun to fear the nails (I'm way ahead of him).[9] The Catholic Church officially frowns upon the festival, but is unlikely to ban it due to the influx of Western tourists it brings. In 2024 the tradition was still going strong and one participant had managed to take to the cross on 35 occasions.

We return to David Huggins from the first series of *FTV*, (**FT448:32**) only now we get to hear a little more intimate detail about his sexual encounters with aliens and see more of his saucy paintings, including those showing the sinister "knob" headed figure orchestrating proceedings.

It's not explained why the aliens are so keen on Huggins producing these hybrid progeny – perhaps to pass on his considerable artistic skills? Their obsession with the vigour of human stock is weirdly similar to an older thread within fairy lore, where the good folk steal healthy human children or mates because their own offspring are so sickly.[10]

EPISODE 7

Fanthorpe considers some new sources of food for our rising population, pointing out that in Vietnam the humble rat has been the "mainstay of the oriental diet for centuries". The Golden Coast restaurant in southern China serves up not just rat, but dishes made of earthworm, tongue of duck and sea snake. Rat hair can also be used to make fur coats and their skins cured for belts. Belgium's Vissershof restaurant championed the consumption of rat meat closer to home, sourcing the animals from the local canal (although killjoy food inspectors apparently banned the dish in 2001.[11]

We move on to insects as a low fat, high protein alternative to meat,[12] featuring pan fried bee larvæ and roasted coconut worms. Then back to the wound-cleaning maggots from Series 1.

Next, Fanthorpe tells us the sorry tale of Edward Mordake, born with two faces, with the extra visage on the back of his head. Mordake committed suicide at 23, we hear, requesting his second face be obliterated lest it continue its "dreadful whisperings in the grave". A fabulous story, but one without any basis in fact, it appears; a Reuters piece, with comprehensive links, puts to bed both the original urban myth and a papier-mâché head that later cropped up on social media.[13]

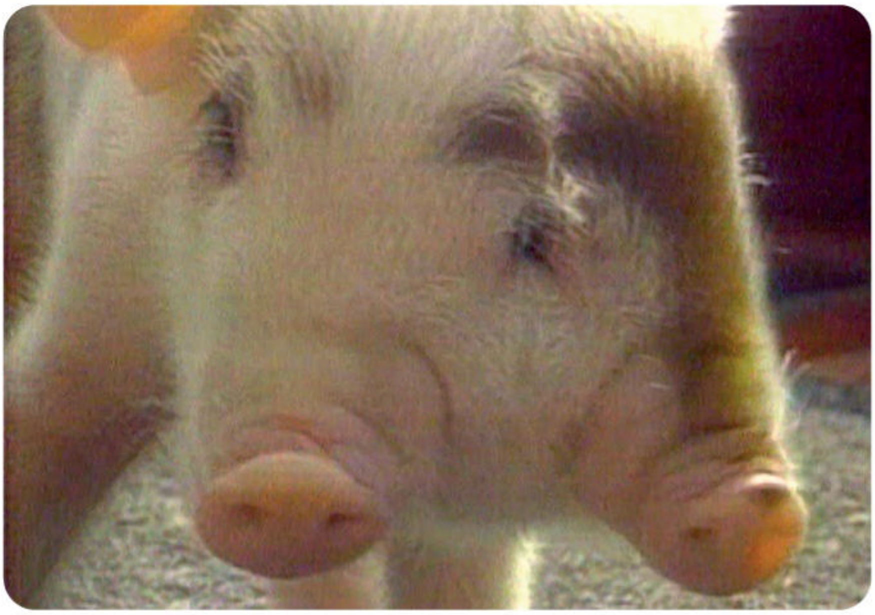
After this we descend into the territory of the traditional carnival freak show with a parade of malformed animals. A highlight is a two-faced pig from Iowa. Are pollution and modern pesticides leading to rising incidents? Even the tap water in Minnesota is causing misshapen limbs in frogs (this is less surprising than it seems as amphibians are extremely sensitive to chlorine).[14]

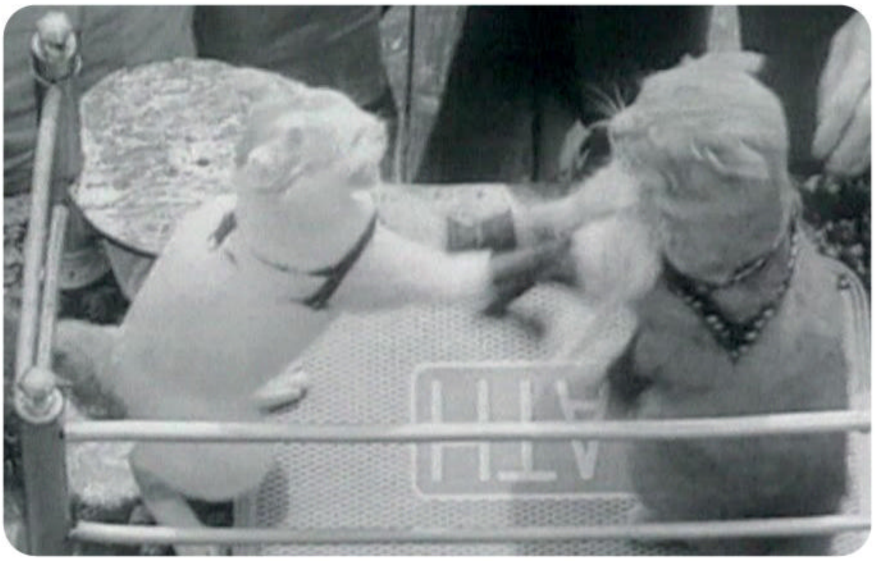
Then the all-time greatest piece on *Fortean TV* is revisited: Alexandra Sellers and her ludicrous ancient language of cats (**FT448:33-34**). I've captured some extraordinarily inappropriate archive footage of cat boxing that I overlooked on my previous pass.[15]

EPISODE 8

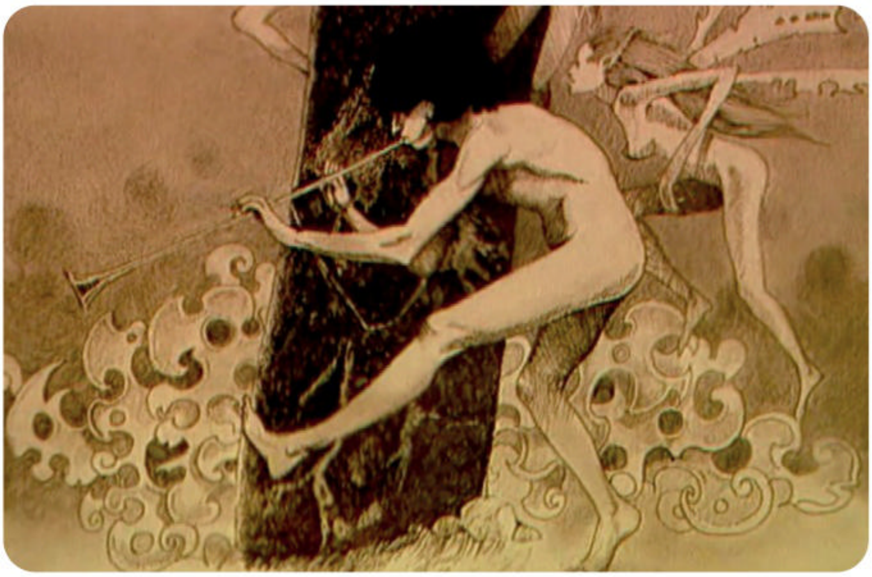
In some traditional cultures the birth of an abnormal child was considered to bring bad luck to the entire community, Fanthorpe explains. Those that survived were often hidden away, becoming the truth behind later legends of strange creatures and half-human monsters. Could fairies and pixies be inspired by a rare genetic disorder that curses children with bizarre facial characteristics?

Folklorist Jacqueline Simpson [16] introduces William's or "Elfin Face" Syndrome,[17] a congenital disease that affects 1 in 20,000 births leading to, she claims: large eyes, deformed ears, learning difficulties – and a startling gift for music. The link between faeries and music is made so often, from Irish folklore to modern fairy encounters, that I am currently studying it for a PhD. A





TOP: Rats are on the menu at the Vissershof restaurant in Belgium; his wife is more comfortable with the vegetarian option. **CENTRE:** A two-faced pig is one of the malformed animals on show. **ABOVE:** I missed this bizarre (and cruel) image of cat boxing last time around.



TOP: Are fairy legends derived from tales of deformed children with a gift for music? Hmm. **CENTRE:** The hairy Sebes family insist they are no threat to their neighbours. **ABOVE:** Saucy shots of Rachel the modern day vampire licking the blood from one of her victims/clients.

William's Syndrome advocacy website speaks to this alleged "affinity to music" which they are at pains to stress does not always equal enhanced ability.[18] None of this is very convincing as an explanation for the hundreds of years of rich fairy lore in the English speaking world. I could find nothing, for example, on people with William's Syndrome living in a magical dimension, stealing babies or granting wishes.

A section on deformed children in fishing communities reruns the mermaid footage from Series 1, but with additional disturbing photos and the unsourced claim that midwives sometimes sold dead infants to travelling showmen. The hucksters would enhance their pitiful remains with a fish's tail.

The luckless Sebes family from Mexico are compared to werewolves because they suffer from *hypertrichosis universalis*, or excessive hair growth. The condition affects both sexes, but is worse in the boys. The family vainly try to explain to the cameras that they do not in fact eat people. A famous sufferer was the 17th century German harpsichord enthusiast and rope-dancer Barbara van Beck, who rose to some wealth and prominence in her day (see **FT209:46-51, 364:26-27**).

Next, more sexualised and sadomasochistic footage is rolled out of Rachel, the "Vampire Marchioness" of Toronto who we met back at the end of Series 1 (**FT449:50**). Fanthorpe stresses that what we are seeing (what are we seeing?) may be legal in Canada, but would likely wind you up in court in the UK.

El Chupacabras returns briefly, in the service of running some spare frames from a comprehensive rabbit autopsy. Before the Internet, sensitive townies with fluffy pets just didn't see things like this very often.

We finish with microscopic monsters at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, from pubic crabs to other exotic parasites, our "body is a zoo" according to Professor Richard Ashford. The professor himself nearly lost his foot to skin burrowing jigger fleas during a visit to Africa.[19] Fanthorpe tells us the thousands of mites in every pound of household hoover dust feed on human skin and their excretions can cause asthma. Meanwhile the dastardly acanthamœba attacks the retinas of contact lens users.[20]

CONCLUSION

Phew. It's almost a relief to get to the end of that. I mean, I feel slightly unclean, there's a faint whiff of formaldehyde in the air, and I'm afraid to be alone. But on some level, I've been challenged, I've been moved. I'll probably never see TV quite like it again. Thank you, Father Lionel. I think. Next, the last episode of the show ever broadcast: the Christmas Special. So, pour yourself a stiff drink and we'll meet up again next month to see *Fortean TV* out on a festive high.

ABOVE: Father Lionel wonders if this is the end of the road for Fortean TV... don't worry, it isn't quite.

THE SEBES FAMILY FROM MEXICO VAINLY TRY TO EXPLAIN TO THE CAMERAS THAT THEY DO NOT IN FACT EAT PEOPLE

NOTES

1 https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3634279/

2 https://bodyworlds.com/exhibitions/

3 https://web.archive.org/web/20220729114831/https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/23/arts.china; https://web.archive.org/web/20090111033803/http://www.pressemeldinger.no/read.asp?RecNo=15417

4 www.nhs.uk/conditions/ehlers-danlos-syndromes/

5 www.chick.com/

6 www.facebook.com/keenan.roberts/; https://holyculture.net/read/the-business-of-scaring-the-hell-out-of-people-literally/; www.godestiny.org/drama-productions

7 Some Islamic scholars are more open to self-flagellation if it does not cause lasting harm: www.collectiveijtihad.org/blog/self-flagellation

8 www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/aug/28/religion.islam

9 https://apnews.com/article/philippines-good-friday-crucifixions-pampanga-province-c725e903d17a356d2a179ef0cda17a9c

10 See Ceri Houlbrook, p.105 in Magical Folk co-edited by FT's Simon Young and Ms Houlbrook.

11 The killjoy food inspectors apparently banned the dish in 2001: www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/18065081_1050. For an excellent review of the risks and benefits of rodent meat worldwide try this study: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5341521/. But before you experiment yourself, please remember that consuming unorthodox animal products remains a likely origin of the COVID-19 pandemic.

12 https://sciencemediahub.eu/2024/01/10/eating-insects-good-for-your-health-the-planet-and-nutritionally-equivalent-to-meat/

13 www.reuters.com/article/world/fact-check-two-faced-mummified-head-isnt-edward-mordrake-but-is-made-of-papie-idUSKBN249281/

14 Pet frogs should never be kept in tap water: www.froglife.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Froglife_JustAddWater_2011.pdf. This paper discusses birth defects in animals and stresses that amphibians are especially vulnerable to environmental contamination. It also includes the alarming revelation that the average alligator penis size is shrinking https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20377310/

15 Not the same as this famous and incredibly old film of boxing cats shot by Thomas Edison in 1894 (www.atlasobscura.com/articles/thomas-edison-boxing-cats-first-cat-video) or a later one dated to 1935 (www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/video/1930s-2-cats-with-gloves-boxing-in-miniature-boxing-ring-news-footage/2016-401). Just how popular was cat boxing? Maybe one for Jan Bondeson to answer...

16 Among her many achievements Simpson collaborated with Terry Pratchett on the Folklore of Discworld.

17 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1249/

18 www.williams-syndrome.org/resources/factinfo-sheet/music-and-williams-syndrome

19 www.cdc.gov/dpdx/tungiasis/index.html

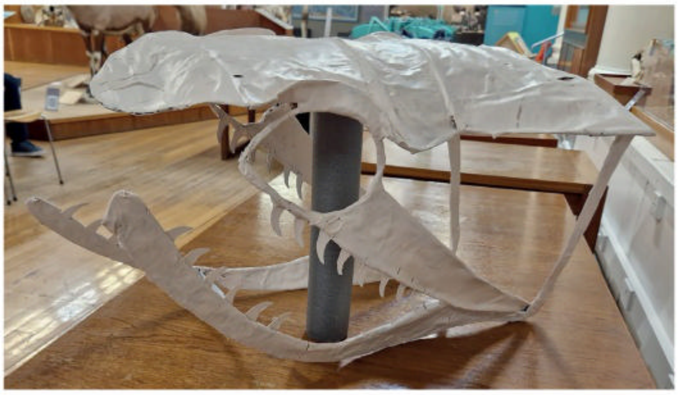
20 www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/eye-and-vision-conditions/acanthamoeba?sso=y

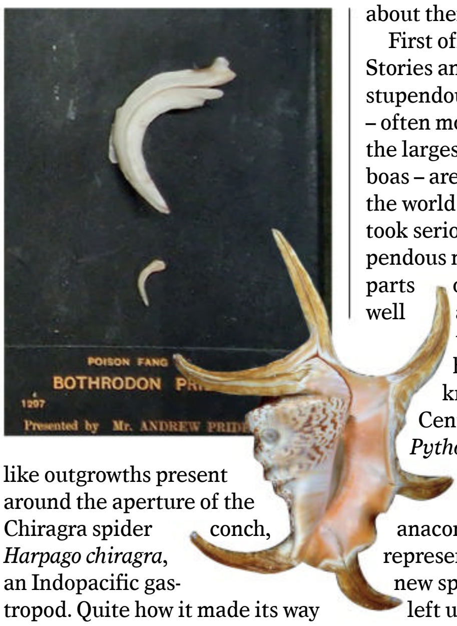
Ryan's coverage of the first series of *Fortean TV* can be found in **FT448:28-35** and **449:44-51**. and the second series in **FT462:44-51** and **463:44-51**.

RYAN SHIRLOW is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His latest effort is a spooky children's audio drama, *The Automatic Leprechaun*, available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com. Ryan is currently conducting research into fairy music for his PhD.

Snake Summer at the Hunterian

DARREN NAISH considers the snakes of the cryptozoological archives, a diverse lot that includes giants, winged marvels and weirdos unlike any species known to science.





LEFT: A schematic model giving some idea of what the Bothrodon skull might have looked like, had it been real. **BELOW LEFT:** The original Bothrodon tooth in Glasgow. **BELOW CENTRE**: A Chiragra spider conch

PHOTOS: DARREN NAISH

During late August 2025, the Hunterian Museum of Zoology in Glasgow hosted *Snake Summer*, an event covering snakes in science, folklore and fantasy organised by Dr Will Tattersdill of the University of Glasgow and Dr Jordan Kistler of the University of Strathclyde.

Why hold a Snake Summer meeting in Glasgow? 2025 is the Year of the Snake in the Chinese horoscope, but inspiration also came from the fact that the Hunterian is home to the type specimen of Sir John Graham Kerr's *Bothrodon pridii* of Ice Age Paraguay. It even has a cabinet display devoted to this supposed species. Published by Kerr in 1926 and based on a single giant fang 65mm long, *B. pridii* was thought to be evidence of a stupendously huge venomous snake, probably related to living back-fanged South American snakes like the Patagonian green racer, *Philodryas patagoniensis*. But at around 20m (66ft) long, this was a behemoth specialised for predation on Pleistocene megafauna.

Snake expert Raymond Ditmars, writing about *B. pridii* in 1931, was happy to accept Kerr's proposal, noting in particular that "the thought it inspires rather dulls the conjectural image of that dinosaurian star, *Tyrannosaurus*, whose race passed away ages before this mammoth *Bothrodon* prowled the soil." Take that, *T. rex*. *Bothrodon* is the stuff of legend in palæoherpetology and few people know about it today. Alas, the alleged *B. pridii* fang proved to be one of the curved, finger-like outgrowths present around the aperture of the Chiragra spider conch, *Harpago chiragra*, an Indopacific gastropod. Quite how it made its way to Paraguay where it was obtained by missionary Andrew Pride is still unknown. Needless to say, the concept of a 20m (66ft) back-fanged snake is quite the thing and Jordan has helped visualise how remarkable such an animal would be via the construction of a hypothetical life-sized skull. It's around 70cm (27in) long.

In 1986, 'father of cryptozoology' Bernard Heuvelmans published his 'Annotated Checklist Of Apparently Unknown Animals With Which Cryptozoology Is Concerned'. Of the 140-ish cryptids included, eight are snakes, and these fall into three rough categories. My attendance at Snake Summer was accompanied by a talk on these and what we think about them today.

First off, there are the giants. Stories and anecdotes about stupendously big modern snakes – often more than twice as large as the largest confirmed pythons and boas – are of course ubiquitous the world over, and Heuvelmans took seriously the idea that stupendous mega-snakes existed in parts of Africa and Asia as well as Amazonia. Whether these were just record-holding specimens of known species (like the Central African rock python, *Python sebae*, Reticulated python, *Malayopython reticulatus*, and Green anaconda, *Eunectes murinus*, or represented as yet unrecognised new species was something he left undecided. Either way, Heuvelmans wasn't sufficiently sceptical of the key accounts.

The best known of these is Percy Fawcett's Brazilian tale of 1907 (published in his 1953 book *Exploration Fawcett*) in which Fawcett claimed to have seen, shot dead, and measured, an anaconda 18m long (see pp.28-33). An entire essay if not a book could be written on the events Fawcett discussed and there are good reasons for thinking that he was not a reliable narrator.

Here's your reminder than a snake 18m (59ft) long is bigger than the biggest *real* fossil snakes we know of (among which are *Titanoboa* of the Colombian Palæocene and *Vasuki* of the Indian Eocene), the maximum estimated sizes of which are somewhat shy of 15m (49ft). Also of note is that the greatest authenticated lengths of living snakes are less than 8m (26ft). If you know anything about giant snakes you'll know that the cash reward for a snake 10m (33ft) long offered by the New York Zoological Society (today the Wildlife Conservation Society) has never been claimed. The Hunterian is itself home to an especially big Reticulated python, purchased from Rowland Ward Ltd in 1917, and originally sourced from Malaysia. Curator Mike Rutherford notes that it's been measured at 7.07m (23ft), but the general feeling is that the skin the mount is based on was artificially stretched to make it as long as possible.

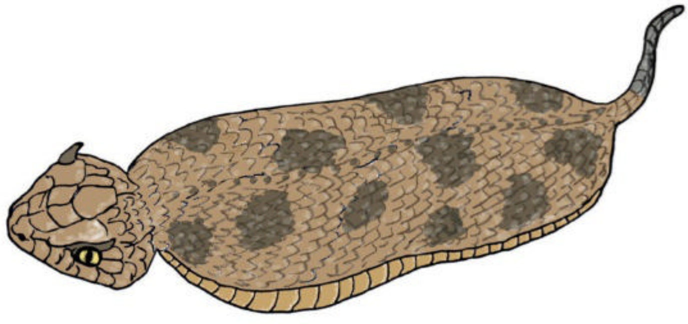
My favourite giant snake story concerns the 1959 Katanga snake, seen from a helicopter piloted by Colonel Remy van Lierde and photographed by engineer Adjutant Kindt. Katanga was part of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but the event occurred when the area was still under colonial Belgian rule. Van Lierde and his colleagues (at least four men were on board) thought that the snake was something like 14m (46ft) long and most serious efforts to work out its length have agreed that it was very large. I don't agree with suggestions that photographic trickery was used or that the photo shows a small snake merely made to look bigger; I think it's clear from the photo that it really was very large. How large? In recent years some effort has been spent by online investigators to find the precise location in which the photo was taken, and – via the use of clues on the landscape (paths, termite mounds, trees) – then work out the snake's size. A precise measurement has never been arrived at, but some

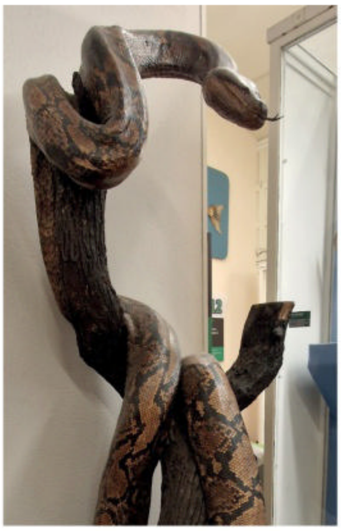
very faulty ones certainly have, some of which put the snake at over 30m (98ft) or even over 60m (197ft) long. The estimates that look more reliable suggest a length of over 7m (923ft). But the difficulty of accounting for the altitude from which the photo was taken makes any estimate highly speculative.

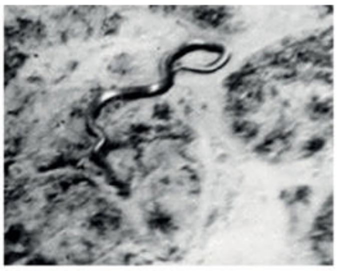
The second lot of snakes covered by Heuvelmans might be regarded as 'cryptid snakes of more provincial interest' and include the 'boss snakes' of eastern North America and several alleged European mystery snakes. It's the third category where things become exciting to non-specialists: the *very weird ones*. My favourite of these is the crowing crested cobra of the southern half of Africa, allegedly a crested, wattled, venomous, tree-climbing snake said to be both large (5m/16ft or more) and capable of making rooster-like calls. The various crowing crested cobra traits are reminiscent of those associated with the mostly European basilisks and cockatrices, accounts of which extend back to the first century writings of Pliny the Elder. Beyond that, things are hazy in the extreme and we don't know where ideas about these creatures really come from. Could the European lore of the basilisk have its roots in tales from Africa, or could it be the other way round? Attempts to rationalise the crowing crested cobra of course exist and some writers have wondered if there really might be a cobra- or mamba-type snake with an erectile frill or crest, or if some accounts might describe observations of mambas or other snakes where their sloughed skin has gotten stuck about the back of the head, thus forming a ruff or frill.

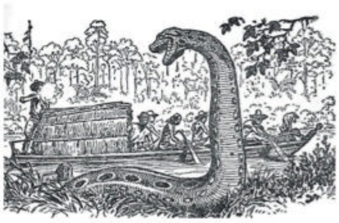
Across virtually the whole of the Japanese archipelago are found tales and stories of a surreal broad-bodied snake called the tsuchinoko. It's supposed to have an obvious neck and a short, narrow tail that's highly distinct from the body. The word 'tsuchinoko' is sometimes said to mean 'son of the straw bat', a 'straw bat' being a sports bat, not a winged mammal. Tsuchikonos are widespread in popular culture and numerous toys and models are available.

Tsuchinokos are said to vanish in a flash of light, speak, roll downhill by forming themselves into a hoop, another motif repeated in snake stories from elsewhere in the world (**FT264:32-37, 292:44-45**), and to be fond of alcohol. We thus have firm indications that the tsuchinoko is mythical and more of a magical spirit than a real animal. But that hasn't stopped cryptozoologists from attempting to rationalise it and a serious claim made more than once is that it might be a viper species awaiting discovery, perhaps a species of the Asian pit viper genus *Gloydius*. After all, pit vipers can be broad-bodied, wide-headed and with a tail that's very narrow and is strongly demarcated from the body.









LEFT: Japan's tsuchinoko as it's supposed to look: a short, fat snake with horns. **BELOW LEFT**: Giant reticulated python at the Hunterian Museum of Zoology, a specimen just over 7m (23ft) long and thus among the biggest known. **BELOW RIGHT**: The Katanga snake photo (top) and an illustration of Fawcett's giant anaconda encounter.

These tales are a total hodgepodge in terms of what's described

Finally, what of winged snakes? Tales of snakes with wings – either proper little bird- or bat-like wings or membranes that can be unfurled from the sides of the body – come from southern Africa, the USA (Arizona especially; see **FT248:30-36**), the UK, central Europe, Arabia and northern Africa. They're a total hodgepodge in terms of what's described and some of the older accounts are so vague that there have even been suggestions that they're garbled references to large insects like locusts.

Within recent decades, stories of an alleged winged snake from Namibia have received much coverage in the mystery animal literature (**FT451:33-34**). The creature concerned (supposedly observed as recently as the 1990s) is, again, imbued with a list of traits that seem more to do with belief in the mythical than in observation of any real animal. It's not just winged but also has prominent horns, a glowing jewel embedded in its forehead, is gigantic (at 5m/16ft or so), and highly dangerous to boot. That doesn't sound like a real reptile species awaiting scientific discovery and there seems to be overlap with the basilisk and other European myths.

Winged snakes were illustrated and written about in the European natural history literature between the 1500s and 1800s and fringe authors have made suggestions that these might indicate a reality for reptiles of this sort. But a fact mostly unappreciated outside the technical folkloristic literature is that the scholars documenting these flying snakes, most notably Swiss naturalist and writer Johann Scheuzer (1672-1733), were operating within a paradigm whereby folklore was deemed to have similar reliability to the less remarkable observations of mainstream natural history. This has been termed 'scientification'. Accounts and legends of trolls, little people and dragons were interpreted as true recollections of real animals by Scheuzer and his colleagues, and if dragons are real, baby dragons must be real too. And baby dragons and snakes with wings are the same thing: what were being termed 'snakes' weren't necessarily meant to be snakes in the sense of belonging to the official group of animals that go by that name.

Needless to say, the coverage of 'mystery snakes' given here (and in my talk) isn't comprehensive, since there are so many snake tales, myths and weird accounts worldwide. But in covering alleged giants, cryptid snakes of more provincial interest and very odd crested and crowing, wide-bodied and winged snakes, this isn't a deficient review. It's consistent with the fact that snakes are not just a near-globally present, ecologically important and successful group of animals, but one that's had a massive impact on tradition, mythology and culture across the entire history of our species.

➾ **DARREN NAISH** is an author and palæozoologist affiliated with the University of Southampton. He has a long-standing academic interest in cryptozoology and wrote the 2013 *Cryptozoologico*n and the 2016 *Hunting Monsters*.

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Flying saucers have landed!

David Clarke enjoys a detailed and entertaining account of the great British UFO hoax of 1967, that poses the serious question: do we actually have a plan for the arrival of aliens?

Landed!

The Great British Flying Saucer Hoax & other Extraterrestrial Spoofs

John Keeling

Self-published/Amazon 2025

Pb, 445pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781068702907

A hoax is defined by the *OED* as "a humorous or mischievous deception" that usually takes the form of a fabrication of something fictitious, "told in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim".

Serious ufologists are keen to play down the role they play in the history of their subject because so many of its foundation stories, including the best photographs, the alien autopsy video, contactee, abductee, UFO crash stories plus MJ-12 and other faked government documents, are all rooted in hoaxes of varying complexity.

But the most audacious and elaborate of them all has been largely ignored by UFO writers – until now.

Media producer John Keeling spent three decades investigating what he calls "the Great Flying Saucer Hoax" of 1967 and this excellent, entertaining book is the outcome.

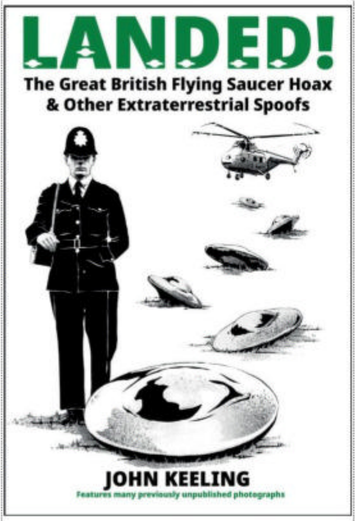
From the outset, Keeling makes it clear there is nothing scientifically implausible about the idea of visits from intelligent aliens. But *Landed!* examines how the widespread popular acceptance of "the Flying Saucer myth" has been manipulated by pranksters for a variety of reasons.

There is a misconception that UFO hoaxers are motivated primarily by financial reward but that is not always the case. The collective response to invented stories tells us more about our hopes, fears and ability to cope should an actual ET landing ever occur.

The UFO invasion of 1967, at the height of one of the biggest UFO flaps, was summarised by John Keeling in *Fortean Times* in 2007 (**FT228:32-41**). His book goes much further, drawing upon the memories of the student pranksters and reconstructing the reaction of the police, RAF, Ministry of Defence, media and ufologists.

In summary, during the autumn of 1967 a group of young apprentices at Farnborough's prestigious Royal Aircraft Establishment hatched a clever and audacious plot to raise money for charity in the annual student rag week.

The ringleaders had form, in that two years earlier they created a miniature spaceship, looking much like a NASA Mercury project capsule. This was left in the Dartford Marshes of Kent where it successfully fooled the police and their employers at Farnborough for 24 hours, making newspaper headlines. This success led them to wonder how the authorities would react to the arrival of a fleet of flying saucers overnight in southern England.


LANDED!
The Great British Flying Saucer Hoax & Other Extraterrestrial Spoofs
JOHN KEELING
Features many previously unpublished photographs

Six saucers were built from fibreglass moulds and packed with a foul-smelling gunge

Keeling summarises the questions it raises succinctly: "What would we do if aliens landed? Would we offer greetings? Would we panic? Or would we shoot to kill?"

Six saucers were built from fibreglass moulds, 54in (137cm) long and 30in (76cm) wide, and packed with a foul-smelling gunge. Each contained a mini loudspeaker powered by batteries, carefully prepared to emit an unearthly bleeping noise when moved.

Early on the morning of 4 September the police and RAF were flooded with calls from members of the public who stumbled across the miniature saucers that had been carefully left at places along a line from Clevedon near Bristol to the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. Mayhem ensued over the next 12 hours, with the British Army's bomb disposal units, RAF helicopters, four police forces and the MoD's intelligence officers all drawn into the media flap that followed.

Keeling pointedly uses the reactions of the police and military, who resorted to prising open and blowing up the saucers and washing the substance that spilled out down the drains, to ask: "Does anyone have a plan in case they [aliens] do arrive?" The answer is no.

The 1967 farce raises some unsettling questions about how prepared we are for any unexpected intrusion from an "alien" object or objects, whether from outer space or nearer home. After the lessons learned from a series of disasters that were and should have been foreseen, the most recent being the Covid 19 pandemic, we live in hope that there *might be* a plan.

But in 2004 when Keeling asked the MoD's UFO desk, he was told "[We] might ask the local police force to make initial enquiries and if necessary, may arrange for the object to be removed for further examination."

The idea that aliens might arrive here unexpectedly, without warning, is worthy only of science fiction and the deluded minds of those who believe in UFOs, right? *Landed!* invites the reader to re-visit the preconceptions that we all have, whether sceptic or believer, about the UFO mystery.

Published by the author via Amazon, Keeling's book would have benefited from the attentions of an editor. It is organised in a confusing way, with six appendices examining aspects of the 1967 hoax in more detail, covering the planning of the hoax and the reactions of the media and MoD.

There is a lengthy section listing "unidentified flying balloon" stories largely culled from American press reports, 1947-2009. This aims "to demonstrate the enormous scale of balloon related pranks and mistakes". Although of great interest, it appears out of place here and deserves its own book-length treatment.

Despite these minor caveats this is an impressive piece of writing that is quite unlike any other book with the words *flying saucer* in the title.

★★★★

The magic museums man

Helen Cornish finds this eclectic biography of Cecil Williamson to be a treasure chest

The Witches House

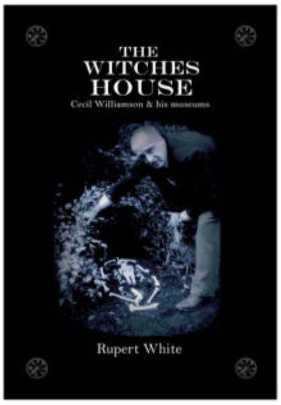
Cecil Williamson & his museums

Rupert White

Antenna Publications 2025

Pb, 284pp, £12, ISBN 9798313403335

Rupert White weaves a fascinating account in *The Witches House*. Cecil Williamson (1909-1999) is probably best known as the founder of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. In his eclectic biography of Williamson's life in 20th-century Britain, White first tracks his family and boarding school days in Mayfair and rural Devon, an apprenticeship on a colonial plantation, a flourishing career in the film industry and a curious role in MI6 during WWII. The final chapters are dedicated to the museums and exhibitions Williamson set up from the late 1940s. His collections concerned witchcraft, superstition, torture, spells, smuggling and shells, and were set up between the Isle of Man, the Cotswolds, and the West Country. His Museum of Witchcraft finally found a permanent home in Boscastle on the north Cornish coast, where it remains today.



In his foreword, Graham King (Museum of Witchcraft director 1996-2013) introduces Cecil Williamson as someone who has "intrigued, influenced, and impressed me for more than 30 years", with his unorthodox and creative curation practices, exceptional storytelling skills, and his extensive correspondence with 20th-century occultists and Wiccans. Like King, I have long been fascinated by Williamson's professional and personal interest in folk magic, as well as his creative collections and sometimes obfuscating stories. This book provides an opportunity to follow the fragmentary stories I have heard over the years, about his early life, meetings with eminent scholars and occultists, and friendships with West Country wise women. One crucial thread tracks his significant but turbulent friendship with Gerald Gardner, the "grandfather" of modern Pagan Wicca, who helped Williamson establish the first iteration of the Folklore Centre of Superstition and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man.

White's readable and well-researched biography adds context to the collection of writing published by Steve Patterson in 2014. However, magic, witchcraft, and small, independent museums are only part of Williamson's ventures. White provides detailed information about his family relationships, managing property, building a radio communications centre in the middle of the Ashdown Forest during WWII, and the status of the post-war British film industry.

White's narrative is nicely supported by archive images and documents to illustrate his family and schooldays, colonial and service record, as well as from his museum and collections. In the museum chapters, correspondence about procuring and creating objects as well as photographs of artefacts and displays chapters show Williamson's curatorial vision. While his installations in the Boscastle site have long since been replaced, many of the items are still exhibited today.

I found this book a treasure chest that adds new pieces to the Williamson mosaic, but it is not necessary to have any previous knowledge to find it an intriguing, and well researched biography of a remarkable and larger-than-life man who left a rich legacy.

★★★★★

The Occult Elvis

The Mystical and Magical Life of the King

Miguel Connor

Destiny Books 2025

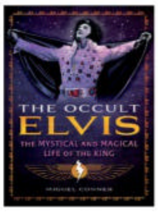
Pb, 288pp, £16.99, ISBN 9798888501351

Miguel Connor's *The Occult Elvis* arrives in a crowded market but remains robust in its arguments and strongly self-aware of the existing work to the point it quotes with confidence and uses the findings of others as a springboard rather than a crutch. And, it is, indeed, often an exploration of the way a dead celebrity enables us to identify and express ourselves. In the simplest terms, the varied incarnations of Elvis – alive and dead – exist in the ceaseless output of researchers and writers and there's a symbiosis, if only because the varied arguments presented will always find followers and acceptance which – in turn – will feed more exploration. As Mojo Nixon stated in a song title, Elvis is Everywhere.

As far as Connor is concerned, the most vital Elvis is the spiritual seeker who devoured a mind-numbing plethora of works including the go-to cult classics of the day by the likes of Madame Blavatsky and Paramahansa Yogananda. When it came to Joseph Benner's mystic meditation *The Impersonal Life*, Elvis gave away industrial quantities of the work, often to complete strangers. Elsewhere his detailed annotations of books given to friends and family now feed our wider understanding of his complex spiritual journey.

Alongside the seeking, Elvis's own paranormal experiences included UFO sightings, instances of his work as a healer, and a sighting of the face of Joe Stalin in a cloud that, ironically, reinforced his Christian beliefs. Conner chronicles all this in succinct and well-referenced chapters, taking the main planks of the argument claiming Elvis as a prime fortean one issue at a time.

The Occult Elvis lucidly dissects much of the strangeness that built on his early trickster qualities, and Connor's diligence in dividing the arguments will probably make the work a go-to for future scholars. Amongst the relatively new ground broken here we get a comprehensive comparison of the occult significance of Elvis and Philip K Dick, both surviving twins, prone to paranormal experiences possessed, specifically, of a sense of contact with both their deceased sibling and some overarching intelligence. Where Connor trawls well-trodden arguments, for example the shamanic aspects of Vegas-era Elvis performances and the way his cultural heritage and comic book obsessions fed the iconography that now helps define his significance, he is careful to argue his own points with articulacy, giving the reader the sense of being in the room with an engaged and passionate expert.



On that score alone *The Occult Elvis* is a worthy addition to any fortean collection because it's a spirited reminder of why this subject, in its widest context, continues to matter to us.

Elvis – without a doubt – Lives!

Neil Nixon

★★★★★

Rudolf II

The Life and Legend of the Mad Emperor

Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann

Reaktion 2025

Hb, 295pp, £17.95, ISBN 9781836390619

Eleanor of Aquitaine

Woman, Queen and Legend

Lindy Grant

Reaktion 2025

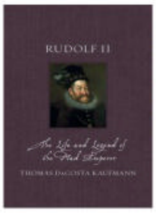
Hb, 224pp, £16.95, ISBN 9781836390862

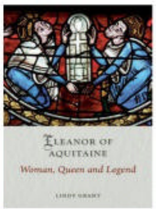
Both Rudolf II of Bohemia and Eleanor of Aquitaine have engendered far more legend than historical fact; indeed, it's often difficult to disentangle the reality from the mythology. History is narratives put together around what are often very few undisputed factual details, maybe centuries after their subjects have turned to dust. But in the case of these two fascinating figures, the narratives began even before their deaths, and were written by political enemies and chroniclers with an agenda.

The sub-title of *Rudolf II* neatly encapsulates what the book is about in an upside-down way. Rudolf's reputation – his legend –

is that he was a mad emperor; he has been portrayed as "a lustful, physically and mentally weak ruler who preferred painting and alchemy to governing and lost power because of his personal pursuits" – but Kaufmann explores his life to demonstrate that he was anything but.

As well as being well-written and hugely informative, the book is beautifully produced, with a wealth of images, most in colour, on high-quality paper, including Arcimboldo's famous painting of Rudolf as Vertumnus. In addition to the bleeding of fact and legend into each other, Rudolf is of interest to forteans for "the biggest and most impressive *Kunstkammer* of his time", and as a major patron of science – his astronomers were Tycho Brahe then Johannes Kepler – including the occult sciences such as alchemy and astrology.





In contrast, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Woman, Queen and Legend* is a disappointment. Although the author says at the beginning that "It is impossible to separate Eleanor the woman from Eleanor the legend" she spends the book doing just that. It's basically a political history of Eleanor as Queen first of France and then of England; there's far less of her as Woman, beyond pointing out that women don't feature much in mediæval official records, even if they're a queen; and almost nothing about her as Legend, beyond dismissing most of the common stories of her being a powerful and influential figure, a patron of the arts and a lover of troubadours – apparently she was none of these. But Grant does say that clerics who were political commentators were by their nature unreliable witnesses; much of their criticism of Eleanor was "as was rumoured".

There's no sparkle to the writing; it's probably a useful academic text for scholars of the period, but a sadly tedious read for anyone who is fascinated by this ancestor of much of Europe's royalty for the last 800 years – whose legend is far more worthy of exploration than this book's dry details would suggest. Perhaps it's time for a corrective along the lines of Kaufmann's *Rudolf II*.

David V Barrett

Kaufmann ★★★★★

Grant ★★

Beneath Our Feet

Everyday Discoveries Reshaping History

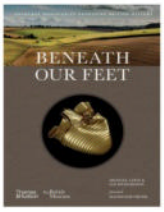
Michael Lewis & Ian Richardson

Thames and Hudson 2025

Hb, 272pp, £30, ISBN 9780500027523

Beneath Our Feet is a gorgeous looking book focusing on the phenomenal work by the Portable Antiquity Scheme (PAS) in recording, and making available to the public, information on finds of archæological artefacts throughout England. Michael Lewis and Ian Richardson present examples from the Portable Antiquities Database (https://finds.org.uk/database) to show the richness of archæological finds recorded by the scheme.

The book is arranged chronologically, from the Palæolithic, right up to a collection of gold American coins hidden in a London garden during the Second World War. Throughout it's nice to see examples of high prestige finds, such as the Shropshire Bullae Sun Pendant from the Bronze Age, alongside more common finds, like barbed and tanged arrowheads. It's also pleasing to see that the book includes broken or damaged artefacts, rather than just pristine ones.



The finds presented here are fascinating, from the haunting stare of the Roman era Crosby Garett Helmet, to the miniature Iron Age weapons found in Kent and Lincoln-shire. Each of the articles is in-depth, both about the circumstances of the discovery of the finds, and their historical context.

It's also refreshing to see mudlarks and fieldwalkers included, alongside detectorists. The relationship between archæologists and detectorists in particular has often been strained over the years, and *Beneath our Feet* does not shy away from this. The work of PAS has done much to ease the friction.

However, the introduction talks about mudlarking and metal detecting democratising archæology, which feels like it's casting it as a class issue with the population on one side and an elite group of archæologists on the other. As someone from a working class (and at one point homeless) background who trained as an archæologist, I think this is a false dichotomy, ignoring the possibilities to get involved, whether that is through local archæological groups, local courses or more formal training. Also, while it talks about the role that detectorists and others have played in widening knowledge about the past in areas where archæologists aren't working, it does seem to gloss over the similar revolution in knowledge starting with PPG16 and developer-funded excavation, which has led to archæological investigations across swathes of previously unaccessed landscape.

Don't get me wrong. These are minor criticisms, probably explained by the focus of the book, and the work of PAS highlighted in *Beneath Our Feet* is incredibly important. I'm also pleased to see the book includes a guide to Best Practice, so anyone who picks up a copy has the information to make the right choices in the field. A beautiful and well-presented volume about the important work of PAS and those with a fascination in the past.

Steve Toase

★★★★

Illumino

A History of Mediæval Britain in Twelve Illuminated Manuscripts

Michelle P Brown

Reaktion Books 2025

Hb, 320pp, £25, ISBN 9781836390374

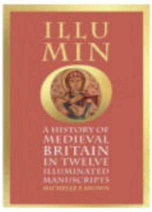
With their elaborately decorated letters, colourful scenes and quirky characters, illuminated manuscripts are some of the best-known images of the Middle Ages. In *Illumino*, Michelle P Brown uses these documents as a window onto the mediæval world, looking not only at the text and images contained with them but the people who made them, commissioned them and acquired them.

Brown's 12 chapters cover one manuscript each from every century from the 8th to the 16th, with one additional manuscript each from the 12th, 14th and 15th.

Illumino is lavishly illustrated, with over 100 illustrations to help connect Brown's descriptions to the manuscripts discussed. These range from famous images of saints and kings to humorous details like the cameo appearances of London artist and merchant John Fifhide in the Holkham Bible. Fifhide, who probably created this volume despite not being primarily in the book trade, appears in several scenes concealed behind groups of bystanders. There are always five other figures, making this a "five-hide."

It's not all 14th-century puns, though: Brown digs deep into the history behind the manuscripts, looking at everything from the religious beliefs and personal devotions expressed in them to the economics of the developing urban book trade in the high Middle Ages. It's a fascinating look at how illuminated manuscripts acted as objects for display, foci for devotion and products of many different skills and resources.

Readers looking for a tour of the weirder side of illuminated manuscripts, with its snail-riding knights and marginal grotesques, will mostly be disappointed here. Brown mentions some of these features of the manuscript tradition, but this is a sober exercise in the history of these complex and fascinating books.


ILLUMIN
A HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL BRITAIN IN TWELVE ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS
MICHELLE P BROWN

Each chapter also includes a short history of the broader historical context of the chosen book. Although *Illumino* calls itself a history of mediæval Britain, it's mainly a history of mediæval England, with only a few sections dealing with Wales or Scotland. It's also mainly – although not only – concerned with the country's wealthy elite, since these were the people who commissioned or owned books.

If you're curious about how illuminated manuscripts were made or used, *Illumino* is an interesting overview of their long history. From a fortean perspective, it provides useful

The poltergeist phenomenon

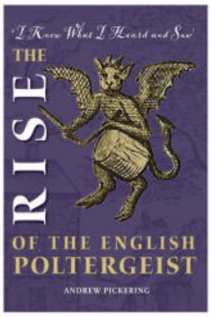
Poltergeists developed as architecture developed, **Alan Murdie** finds, amongst much else, in this insightful new historical study

The Rise of the English Poltergeist

Andrew Pickering

Hobnob Press 2025
Pb, 250pp, £20, ISBN 9781914407932

For decades forteans have asserted that poltergeist phenomena should be taken seriously. Now professional historians are coming to agree with them as demonstrated in this welcome and insightful book by Andrew Pickering, an authority on the supernatural in early modern England. Rather than attempt a millennia-spanning review such as those of Claude Lecouteux or P Maxwell Stewart, he focuses on 27 separate accounts between 1590 and 1718. Encouragingly, Pickering is clearly familiar with the ideas and theories of forteans and psychical researchers, but what most interests him is just what the Tudors, the Stuarts and their successors made of poltergeists and how their explanations shifted over time.


I Know What I Heard and Saw
THE RISE OF THE ENGLISH POLTERGEIST
ANDREW PICKERING

The first half of the book examines the poltergeist in a general historical overview and the second focuses in upon specific examples drawn from contemporary literature with direct quotation and scholarly analysis. Despite the title, Pickering selects beyond English geographical boundaries, incorporating five Scottish cases, one Welsh and two from North America. Here he follows the approach of earlier more popular chroniclers such as Harry Price's *Poltergeist Over England* (1945), but avoiding discussions of psychokinesis or elemental tricksters. Some accounts are familiar (e.g. the Drummer of Tedworth, 1662, and the Wesley poltergeist 1716-17), while others extracted from rare pamphlets will hitherto be known only to specialist scholars, if at all.

The extraordinary physical and objective character of disturbances coupled with a multiplicity of witnesses ensured outbreaks received notice, with a handful receiving attention from some of the most intelligent men of the age. For instance, Joseph Glanvil, an early fellow of the Royal Society, exalted phenomena as a proof against atheism, whilst the account of the demon of the Glenluce in Scotland appears in George Sinclair's *The Hydrostaticks* (1679), a scientific treatise on the physics of fluid bodies. Pickering finds poltergeist effects remain remarkably consistent: despite significant shifts in witchcraft beliefs and religious doctrines, poltergeists rattled on regardless.

Interestingly, Pickering pins the emergence of domestic poltergeists to the evolution in architecture with time, particularly following the creation of the chimney, which enabled the division of property into smaller bedrooms and private spaces. Thus, the haunted house came to replace the more communal haunted castle or manorial hall, with poltergeists of the day finding playgrounds within the segregated and compartmentalised portions of new dwellings. The private bedchambers and quarters occupied by young women, children and servants together with cellars and attics supplied a favourable environment, demonstrating an important social dynamic to effects. It was within these often more confining domestic spaces (especially for girls and women) that tensions, resentments and frustrations could fester, also generating allegations of witchcraft in tandem with popular fears and executions peaking between the 1640s and 1670s.

My one disagreement with Pickering's analysis is his repeated employment of the expression the “witch craze” liberally throughout his text (a phrase popularised by historian Hugh Trevor Roper in 1968). As he notes, only in a relatively small number of cases were outbreaks definitively ascribed to witchcraft; ghosts and demons were also fingered by contemporary observers. For example, the clattering “Troublesome spirit of Soper Lane” (1661) which plucked at bedclothes and levitated furniture was blamed on “the ghost of some party deceased”; in contrast the “She-Demon” of Spreyton, Devon (1682) combined both folkish ghosts and demonic entities materialising together in a variety of guises. In other words poltergeists might erupt spontaneously with no witch in sight.

Furthermore, the official mindset presiding over English witch trials was not one of unmitigated hysteria. Proceedings were ponderous in the extreme with growing suspicions of fraud and delusion being at work rather than occult forces as the 17th century wore on. As Pickering states: “Observers and commentators in the early modern period were as tuned in to these possibilities as the sceptics and believers of present times.” Eventually, the entrenching of rationalist ideas meant the whole notion of witchcraft foundered before a sceptical and increasingly bored judiciary routinely rejecting indictments and dismissing the cases before them.

Pickering sensibly caps his poltergeist collection at 27 entries. He is satisfied that what we term a poltergeist today emerges as a recognisable and unexplained phenomenon in its own right detachable from many other anomalies of the time, with the uniformity of the phenomenon making the mystery. Certainly poltergeist scholars will find many intriguing parallels with later cases. But it is ironic if boredom serves as a factor in preventing scientific acceptance, suggesting deeper psychological forces operate over and beyond the prevailing cultural beliefs of any era.

★★★★

Beastly Britain

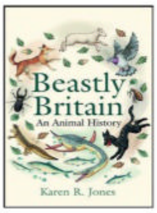
An Animal History

Karen R Jones

Yale University Press 2025
Hb, 336pp, £20, ISBN 9780300264470

Beastly Britain is a celebration of the animals we share our land with and of our relationship with them. Encompassing ethology, biology and folklore, the book is liberally sprinkled with forteana throughout every chapter.

Prof Karen Jones isn't just an expert in her subject, she's an engaging writer whose joy in sharing these animals with us is infectious. She adds a touch of whimsy by occasionally presenting the views of The Terrier, her rather opinionated Jack Russell and frequent companion on country walks, and by adding the word *critterly* to the English language.



A menagerie of foxes, hedgehogs, sheep, pigeons, herring, newts, stag beetles, fleas, black dog and plesiosaurs trot, snuffle, flap and bite their way through the pages. Each has its own remarkable history of co-existence with humans, even plesiosaurs.

Readers with a fondness for military forteana will discover how herrings almost caused a major Cold War incident and be amazed by the Army Pigeon Service Special Section, who braved the ever-present threat of falcons and imprisonment to deliver intelligence-gathering material into occupied France. Or you may wish to consider the role of sheep in early children's TV programming, or see a hedgehog transform from despised vermin to beloved children's character.

The final section of the book, Ghosts and Monsters, is the most overtly fortean as Jones considers two mythical creatures that have had a particular impact on the national psyche; black dogs and plesiosaurs, both of which exist in that misty world of half-belief, appearing from the shadows on deserted country lanes or surfacing in remote Scottish lochs, only to vanish at a speed that defies even our present phone camera-wielding generation.

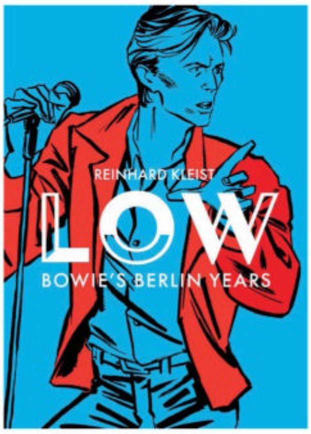
Enhanced by many illustrations, *Beastly Britain* is a delightful book. A true, and extremely critterly, treasure.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★★

COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



Low: David Bowie's Berlin Years

Reinhard Kleist, Thomas Gilke

Self Made Hero

HB, 176pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781914224287

The mystery of creativity is a fortean subject in its own right, and it lies at the heart of Rheinhard Kleist's new comic, *Low: Bowie's Berlin Years*. Dealing with a significant cocaine habit and a worsening psychological state, both of which he blamed on Los Angeles, Bowie moved to Berlin. With Iggy Pop as his flatmate, he set about creating what came to be known as 'The Berlin Trilogy', consisting of the albums *Low*, *Heroes*, and *Lodger*. At the time, he was influenced by Brian Eno, Iggy Pop, German bands such as Neu! and Kraftwerk, and his relationship with Romy Haag. But more than this he was influenced by the city itself.

Kleist perfectly captures the chaos of creativity in this island of a city, surrounded by the DDR and still recovering from war. The colour work by Kleist and Thomas Gilke perfectly captures the shifting temperature of place: the heat and socially cold atmosphere of Los Angeles versus the multicoloured chaos of Berlin.

Obviously, this comic is perfect for Bowie fans, but I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in how artists create, especially when they need to drag themselves into new situations to reinspire themselves. Also, as a regular user of them myself, I was very happy to see Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* cards make an appearance.

Chew: Nomnibus Edition

John Layman, Rob Guillory

Image Comics

HB, 1,488pp, £58.99, ISBN 9781534354371

Following a deadly avian flu outbreak, the United States Food and Drug Administration becomes the most powerful government agency on the planet, charged with enforcing a prohibition on the sale of poultry. Tony Chu is an FDA agent, and cibopathic, meaning if he eats something he gets insights into the feelings and experiences of what he eats. This doesn't even begin to touch how off the wall this comic is. Clocking in at nearly 1,500 pages, the *Chew Nomnibus* is a breakneck trip through a world where chicken products are banned, journalists can write food reviews so precisely you can taste the food as you read, and the Easter Platypus has now replaced the more traditional bunny. In *Chew*, the fourth wall is an inconvenience, and the eating of toes helps solve cases.

Rob Guillory not only did the artwork, but all the colouring throughout, and the way this shifts from browns and greys to washes of green and umber, echoing the tone of John Layman's storytelling is masterful. A reluctant psychic cannibal? This is most definitely a fortean comic for those who want something funny, weird and chaotic.

Look Out: An Illustrated Novella

Dan Baillie, Tim Bradstreet

AWA Studios/Vertigo Entertainment

www.shop.awastudios.com/products/look-out

The definition of a comic can be fairly loose, but one of my favourite ones is a way of expressing ideas with images, sometimes combined with text. This is a pretty all-encompassing description, but I like it. It allows for a lot of variation and creativity. It also allows me to include *Look Out* in this column. Some might argue that because *Look Out* does not include sequential panels, it isn't a comic, but I would gently suggest the key role the images play in the storytelling means that it fits here perfectly.

Following his divorce, Oscar takes a job as a fire lookout, living in an isolated tower in the middle of the forest. When he finds a weird list of rules, he initially dismisses it, but then events get stranger and stranger, until he can't hide from what's going on anymore.

Look Out is a genuinely unsettling story, with a cinematic feel. The writing by Dan Baillie is tight and drives the story along at a perfect pace, while Tim Bradstreet's artwork is haunting, with shadows spilling out of the frame, sunsets beautiful and haunting, and the lack of formal framing making them feel integrated into the storytelling. This feels like an archive you've stumbled on that slowly reveals a terrifying world just beyond the door; a terrifying world that has no intention of staying outside.

Redcoat: Volume 1: Einstein & The Immortal

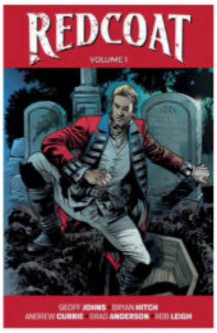
Geoff Johns, Bryan Hitch

Image Comics

PB, 240pp, £13.99, ISBN 9781534373181

Simon Pure was a British soldier in the American Revolutionary War. He was also a coward, a deserter, and a cheat. Due to disturbing a secret ritual held by a group of hooded men, Simon Pure is also unable to die.

Following an introduction in the 18th century, the story moves forward to 1892, where the now permanently broke, and permanently famished Pure meets a young Albert Einstein and becomes the target for the same cult whose ritual he disturbed over a century before.



Weaving in aspects of history and American folklore, *Redcoat* has a refreshing take on the superpower story, featuring an immortal Benedict Arnold, George Washington's axe, and Johnny Appleseed's, well, appleseeds. The artwork is sharp and the writing fast-paced, with a strong main character and an excellent supporting cast. This is part of a wider network of stories, and I look forward to reading more in the 'Ghost Machine' shared universe.

Hawkmoon: The Black Jewel

Jérôme Le Gris, Benoît Dellac, Didier Poli

Titan Books

HB 160pp, £26.99, ISBN 9781787744165

Elric: The Balance Lost

Chris Roberson, Frances Biagini

Titan Books

HB, 160pp, £26.99, ISBN 9781787745179

Titan has an extensive library of publications set in the various worlds erupting from Michael Moorcock's imagination. Some are adaptations into the comic format, like *The Black Jewel*, and some extend and expand his universes, like *Elric: The Balance Lost*. In *The Black Jewel*, Europe is falling before the forces of the Granbretan Empire. With the City of Köln fallen, Dorian Hawkmoon, Duke of Köln finds himself betrayed, with a strange object embedded in his skull that can control him... and if he steps out of line, kill him. *The Balance Lost* finds Elric in a world where chaos is in control, and in which we are introduced, one by one, to aspects of Moorcock's Eternal Champion, including Hawkmoon (at a later point in his story), Corum, and Jerry Cornelius, who must figure out why the balance between chaos and law is tilting and upsetting the equilibrium of the multiverse.

Both books show how rich Moorcock's characters are, and how well they translate to graphic novels. The worlds here are all beautifully illustrated and both volumes use colour effectively, particularly in the way *Balance Lost* uses it thematically to link characters in different aspects of their identity. Both books would make a fine addition to the library of fans of Moorcock or readers of complex inventive science fiction and fantasy. The work of a master, masterfully presented.

The Blood on Bodmin Moor

A new British folk horror evokes the classics of the genre for a 21st century audience

The Severed Sun

Dir Dean Puckett, UK 2025
On digital platforms

Folk horror has been a thing for a long time, but it's an over-used term these days. In film terms it appears to mean something heavily influenced by *Witchfinder General*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* or *The Wicker Man*. In the case of *The Severed Sun*, the feature debut of director Dean Puckett, it's a heady brew of all three. It has the witchfindy bits of the first, the nubile maiden of the second and the isolated religious community of the third. Not that there's anything wrong with that, because those are all fine movies; and in any case Puckett's film offers enough stuff of its own to warrant attention.

Magpie (Emma Appleton) is a feisty young woman who was married off by her father (Toby Stephens), the local Pastor, to control her independent streak. Her husband, though, is abusive, particularly to her youngest child. Finally reaching the end of her tether, Magpie kills the man and dresses up the scene of the crime to make it look as if he died in a drunken wood-chopping accident. She has a vision of an evil spirit emerging from the woods. Thereafter more violence and murder ensue and the God-fearing folk of her community come to believe Magpie is possessed by a demon.

It can sit happily alongside the ouput of Tigon in the early 1970s

It's story that can sit happily alongside the output of Tigon Films of the early 1970s, but also has a place in the 2020s, being a critique of the controlling power of male authority figures, zealous religious beliefs and othering. It is the domestic abuse suffered by Magpie and her young family that sets in motion a succession of gory incidents. Initially, it is only the despicable men of the community who are the 'victims', but as the film progresses others are drawn into the nightmare.

This is a low-budget production, which nevertheless has a good cast. Toby Stephens, who has a naturally dominant mien, is excellent as the Pastor. There's also Jodhi May as a particularly fervent believer. The photography is often beautiful, but then again it would take a lot to make Bodmin Moor, where the film was shot, look ugly. That said, there are one or two problems. Firstly, the production has an uncertain grip on its period setting; it's never stated exactly when the film is set. Initially I thought it was the middle of the 18th century, but then there was a shot of a nicely laid road with white lines painted down the middle. This dates it to no further back than the 1920s and could even be the following decade. Second, the relationships between the characters are not always made as clear as they should be. Overall though it's an intriguing story, well told, which creates an oppressive atmosphere of impending trouble that increasingly breaks out into gruesome blood-letting. It's a descendent of films dating back 50 years but offers its own 21st century social critique.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

Meanwhile on Earth

Dir Jérémy Clapin, France 2024
On digital platforms

If you like your sci-fi to be full-on space opera, with starships, laser guns, robots and all the rest of it, then *Meanwhile on Earth* won't immediately appeal. However, to miss it would be a mistake, because despite the lack of *Star Wars*-style action this is a thoughtful and provocative film which asks some searching questions about grief, mortality and the value of human life. To put it more succinctly: it's French.

Having said that, it's unquestionably a sci-fi film, just not in the way that your average multiplex dweller would recognise. The premise is simple. Care home worker Elsa (Megan Northam) still grieves over the loss of her big brother, an astronaut who disappeared on a mission. She enjoys her job, but otherwise has no *joie de vivre*. Until, that is, she is contacted telepathically by an invisible alien race who claim they have the power to bring her brother back to Earth. Elsa's part of the bargain is that she must acquire five 'empty vessels' (that is to say, recently-dead humans) for the aliens to inhabit, and the film explores the extent to which she is prepared to carry out that task and whom to select as her victims.

A meaty premise, then, and one which to some degree resembles Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*, in which Scarlett Johansson played a shape-shifting alien stuck on our planet. Director Clapin's film is less opaque than that, but none the worse for it. For one thing, it's full of interesting characters. Elsa's mum Annick (Catherine Salée) is also her boss, being the manager of the care home where they both work, and there is an interesting dynamic between the two. Her father Daniel (Sam Louwyck) is a piano teacher/composer/stoner who is a source of empathy and wisdom. The performances are all excellent.

Elsa wrestles with her conscience as she considers whom she might kill. There are a couple of local criminals who perhaps deserve it; there are the elderly residents of her care home who have little time left; and a friend who is even more depressed than Elsa and has nothing to live for.

There have been a few films recently that have been set in old people's homes. Aside from this we've had *The Rule of Jenny Pen*, a harrowing quasi-horror starring John Lithgow, reviewed recently in these pages, and of course *The Thursday Murder Club*, based on Richard Osman's novel and featuring a strong cast. Perhaps this glut of similarly-themed films is an indication of the younger generation fearing old age, or a critique of care homes generally, or more simply reflects the fact that elderly people are entitled to see films that speak to them just as much as any other demographic.

Daniel King

★★★★☆

TELEVISION

FT's couch potatoes, STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS assess the small screen's current fortean offerings

About three minutes into *Lost Souls* (Prime), we're instructed to "forget about all the paranormal TV crap of haunted castles and murdered maids" and are invited instead to watch some new paranormal TV crap about a haunted shopping centre. True to this promise, there is a stark divergence from the usual formulaic hosting by a blonde woman and a man with an improbable beard: this time it's a man with an improbable beard and a blonde woman (Jason Coupland and Liv Edkins respectively). That aside, it does maintain the consistency of the genre with migraine-inducing graphics, self-consciously edgy camera angles and a veritable tsunami of earnestness.

Despite being British, this is clearly aimed squarely at the American market – the captions (themselves frequently mis-spelled or weirdly punctuated) describe the locations as "the mall, the parking lot, the drug store" etc, and they take pains to impress upon us that the owners of said venues have given them permission to investigate on strict condition of total anonymity. This they apply with such gusto that it takes nearly half a minute of googling to work out that it's the Idlewells Centre in Mansfield.

"We are looking for doors in walls that separate the living from the dead in search of spirits," Edkins intones – the couch potatoes meanwhile were heading for the door separating the hallway from the kitchen in search of biscuits, an ultimately more successful quest. Edkins and Coupland remark on the overwhelming, cold melancholy of the location whilst standing outside a branch of Bonmarché, which, whilst relatable, seems harsh.

The lads round off their trip with a trip to a very haunted pub

Elsewhere, there was a genuine departure from the norm. Will Mellor and Ralf Little's series *Will & Ralf Should Know Better* (U&Dave) sees the duo trying stuff out, usually mundane, but in one episode of the latest series they address their own attitudes to the paranormal – Will believes, Ralf doesn't. After meeting a mentalist who explains how easy belief is to manipulate and a quick demonstration of hypnosis and suggestion, they convene with some women in Worcester whom to their surprise are entirely ordinary people that just happen to be witches. Julie, the main witch, also tells them it's all about manipulation: in this case, of energies to effect change. There's some chakra cleansing, chanting and (apparently) voguing before nipping into the woods for some manifesting, and, according to Ralf, rather nice cakes: think Women's Institute in purple robes, though more Sage and Samhain than Jam and Jerusalem.

The lads round off their trip – punctuated by a truly fab soundtrack – with a jaunt to a very haunted pub, where they get to do the classic, obligatory low-light stuff: a séance in the cellar and the overnight stay. Without spoilers, the experience as a whole gives them both food for thought, and for us as an audience it's refreshing to see engaging, likeable celeb presenters more invested in the subject than self-promotion in a highly enjoyable hour.

Osiris

Dir William Kaufman, USA 2025
On digital platforms

A sci-fi actioner: nothing you haven't seen before, but done with sufficient care and craft to make it very watchable.

A unit of special forces operatives led by Kelly (Max Martini) is abducted from an intense firefight by a gigantic spacecraft. Waking up on board, the team realise they are captives of a vicious race of alien warriors and must use all their skills to survive.

So that's your story. It develops a little from there, but not much. If I were being uncharitable, I'd say that what follows is 100 minutes of the history of sci-fi cinema. So numerous are the lifts and steals from other films that this is almost a compilation tape. However, in the hands of writer-director William Kaufman, who is obviously a student of genre cinema, it does eventually take on a life of its own.

By concentrating on a relatively small band of soldiers, unlike, say, *Aliens*, Kaufman is able to draw characters without them being reduced to one personality trait, you know the kind of thing: the rookie, the cowardly one, the funny one, the hillbilly, etc. Without a whole company to keep track of, the characters emerge as individuals, meaning that what happens to them carries greater emotional weight. This is backed up by the standard of the acting, which is significantly higher than most films of this type. Max Martini in the lead is impressive in a stoic, Clint Eastwood-type way and there's strong support from Brianna Hildebrandt (from the *Deadpool* films) and genre stalwart Linda Hamilton.

I don't imagine the budget was very big – a tiny fraction of what a summer blockbuster costs – but despite that, the production values are good, or for the most part good enough to stop the seams showing. There is a sense of the vastness of the labyrinthine vessel in which the characters are trapped and the superior tech used by the aliens is convincing.

There are problems. This is essentially a film where the baddies are men in rubber suits, which is what sci-fi films were doing 70 years ago, so it can be difficult on occasions to take it seriously. There is a lot of running up and down the same corridor, obviously because the sets they had at their disposal were limited. The photography, while excellent, is exceedingly dark, which means at times it is hard to tell what's going on. That's okay, though, because what's going on is generally a shoot-out; you're not going to miss anything crucial. Then of course there's the lack of originality. Reaction to that will probably go one of two ways: either "Oh gawd, that's a rip off of that moment in *Predator*" or "Oh look! That was like that great bit from *Star Wars*." So, if you're looking for some envelope-pushing then you absolutely will not get it from *Osiris*, but if you fancy a bit of old-fashioned, undemanding sci-fi action, then you'll get that in spades.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

STRANGER FOLK

RYAN SHIRLOW ENLISTS FT'S YOUNGEST REVIEWERS (HIS DAUGHTERS EMILY AND ALICE) TO ROAD-TEST THE NATIONAL TRUST'S NEW APP IN TIME FOR HALLOWE'EN

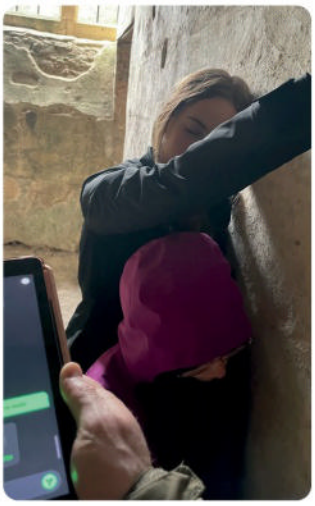
The National Trust has released a new *Stranger Folk* interactive phone app to accompany visitors to some of their stately homes and gardens this autumn, cashing in on the growing trend for all things folklore-related, and the younger generation's obsession with screens. The app is best partaken of at a site you're already familiar with, as you will soon find yourself absorbed in its various puzzles and challenges rather than paying much attention to the nation's cultural heritage. I set off with my daughters Emily (14) and Alice (10) to Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire to review the app for FT. Soon my children and I were singing silly songs, stomping our feet in circles to summon up worms, and hugging the estate's various trees. At all times we kept watch out of the corner of our eyes for the hidden "strange folk" sneaking through the cracks into our reality. Other visitors gave us a wide berth.

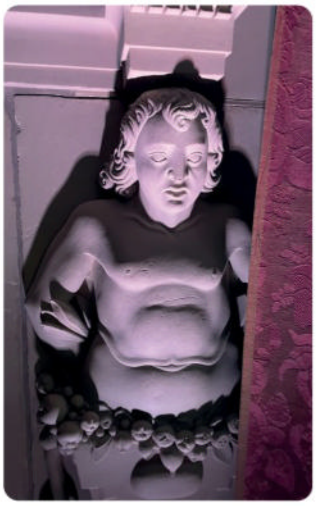
Conservative Christians, and some practising pagans, might feel bemused to watch their children re-enact spurious rituals to the app's disembodied commands (a "witch-like character" according to Alice.)

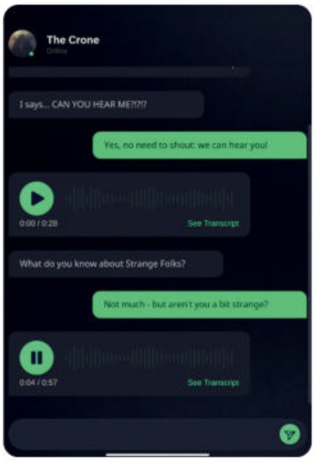
The voice acting and graphics throughout are exceptional. A disturbing highlight was hiding in the gloom beneath a stairway in the ruins of Hardwick Old Hall, with Alice plunging her arm into a deep hole in the render to help seal the rift between worlds.

Adults would benefit from knowing in advance (SPOILER ALERT) that part way through your adventure the witch is almost defeated by a sinister unseen spirit, a boggart that then appears to possess and destroy your device. For many parents, folk horror cannot match the true terror of expensive technological destruction.

Fortunately, contact with the witch is soon restored. At the end we were given the option to leave a little crack open for magic to sneak through and we wrapped up the adventure with a fairy dance. My mind was racing with a number of ways from Irish tradition that this could go very wrong, only to find that our way out of the ruins was now barred by a very real and rather aggressive Devil's Coach Horse beetle patrolling the steps. This angry apport could not have been better timed if a member of staff had sneakily thrown the creature there from some concealed position. Serendipity, or the fairies, had provided the perfect postscript to the day's excitement.







The Crone

I says... CAN YOU HEAR ME?!?!?

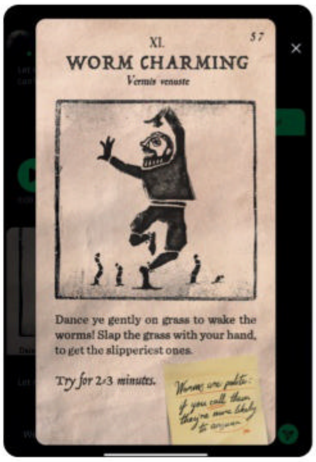
Yes, no need to shout: we can hear you!

0:00 / 0:28 See Transcript

What do you know about Strange Folks?

Not much - but aren't you a bit strange?

0:04 / 0:57 See Transcript



XI. 57

WORM CHARMING

Vermis venuste

Dance ye gently on grass to wake the worms! Slap the grass with your hand, to get the slipperiest ones.

Try for 2-3 minutes.

Worms are polite: if you call them they're more likely to answer!

> **Soon we were stomping our feet in circles to summon worms**

STRANGER FOLK
Vol.1
Crone Calling
START

We retired to the cafe where I asked my children to collect their thoughts. Alice overall thought the app was "great", while noting her elderly iPad had sometimes struggled. She enjoyed cracking the code to start the game and following the instructions to explore the house and grounds. Emily also enjoyed herself, while feeling a little more self-conscious with some of the "embarassing" or "fun silly things" she was asked to do. She noted the app often "told us to go somewhere quiet. This shows it is mindful of others exploring the area." As a teenager, she definitely engaged with the way it was "set-up like we were texting" the witch character.

To conclude, Alice felt it has been a "lovely way to get you looking around the place" and "would recommend." Emily felt it might be targeted to people a little younger than her, "but my dad was still enjoying it!"

Stranger Folk is live at the time of writing at the following National Trust properties: Belton Estate, Blickling Estate, Ham House, Hardwick Hall, Ilam Park, Longshaw Estate, Kingston Lacy, Knightshayes and Snowshill Manor & Garden. If it proves a success we can expect more adventures to appear across the country next year.

You can download the Stranger Folk app from the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store, or go to: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/whats-on/go-on-a-quest-with-the-stranger-folk-app-this-halloween

LETTERS

CONTACT US BY POST: PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE CT1 9RH, OR BY E-MAIL. **NOTE: PLEASE USE EMAIL SIEVEKING1968@GMAIL AT THE PRESENT TIME.** PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH YOUR POSTAL ADDRESS

Eyeworth Pond ghost

I was surprised in seeing a multi-page report about the alleged ghost at Eyeworth Pond [**FT461:36-39**]. I was 25 or 26 when I first saw the picture, probably in the *Sunday Mirror* (I may even still have the cutting somewhere) and I thought at the time that it was quite clearly an older woman in a loose-fitting coat, in the act of raising one of the (then common) 110 size instamatic cameras to her eye, in order to get a picture of the hunt. I wondered at the time how anyone could ever have thought it was anything else, as it seemed so blindingly obvious to me, and nothing in the past 35 or so years has given me the slightest grounds for changing my opinion. I was mildly amazed that it had engendered any controversy at all on the forum, as it all seems as clear as day to me.

● ‘Cockroach shoots man’ [**FT462:7**] stretches the imagination somewhat: a man takes his shoe off, in which he had hidden a revolver? Even the Kolibri 2.7mm automatic, the smallest centrefire pistol ever sold, would still be unbearably uncomfortable inside a shoe that was being worn. A revolver is almost by definition bulkier than an automatic of the same calibre, so it would have to be an exceptionally spacious shoe…

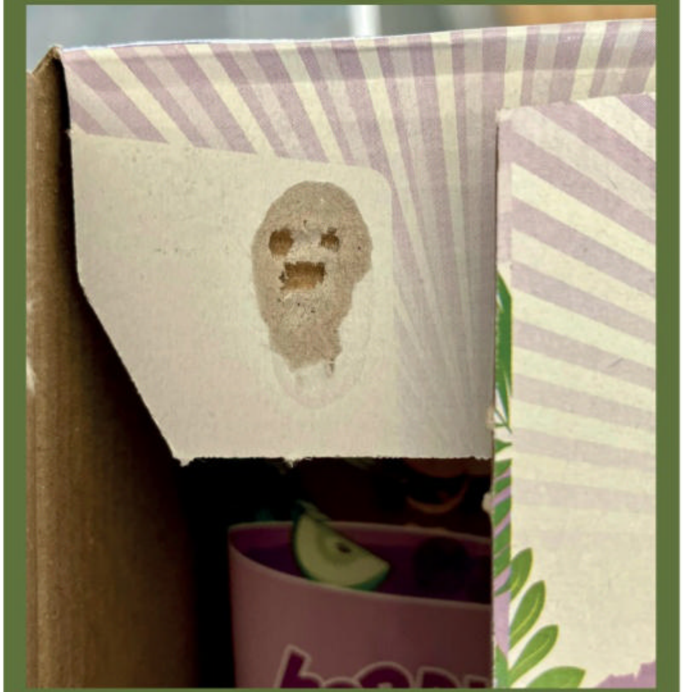
Christopher Dean
Builth Wells, Powys

Zizians

Contrary to John Gray’s assertion that the Zizians cult [**FT460:61**] wasn’t widely reported on, a cursory Google search shows articles in all the usual major news outlets. I’d also like to point out that the vast majority of death cults aren’t made up of trans folk and I’d like to invite Mr Gray to ponder if a contributing factor to some of the cult member’s isolation and nihilism was perhaps the rampant transphobia that has been on the rise these last few years to the point that in the 2022 US midterm elections, the GOP’s campaigning focused almost entirely on anti-trans sentiment (and were trounced because of it). Now in the US and UK as well as other places in the world, trans folk are having the few rights they had revoked. As terrified as Mr Gray is of getting on the wrong side of trans folk, more trans folk are assaulted and murdered than trans folk assault and murder and those are statistical facts. In fact the most dangerous demographic for murder, violent crime and sexual violence by a huge margin is Cis males.

Anon
By email

SIMULACRA CORNER



On opening a juice box carton the other day, Matt Stanhope was pleased to see what looks to him like a small friendly ghost.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking68@gmail.com**

The watery restorer

Re: Simon Young’s “Fairies, folklore and forteana” piece [**FT459:27**], the tale of the Watery Restorer struck a chord with me in terms of why the items that humans are instructed to find are often dropped into the water. Why, Young asks, is this the case? It reminded him of Excalibur waiting at the bottom of a lake. It reminded me of Flag Fen, an historical site situated just outside Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, where Bronze Age Britons were said to have built a causeway out of trees where important meetings and ceremonies were conducted: business deals, marriages, funeral rites.

What’s most interesting in terms of the WR phenomena is the large number of swords and other weapons found by archæologists that have been bent or damaged in some way as they were submitted to the water. We don’t know enough about these ancient people to fully understand their reasons for this, but it was clearly very important to them to take the trouble to carry out this act. The most common theory is that the items were damaged in order to ‘kill’ them so that they could pass into the next world with their owner or as a seal of a promise on a contract. Either way, it’s well worth a visit. Excavated by Francis Pryor over the last few decades, Flag Fen now has a lovely visitor centre and replica round houses. But the most incredible exhibit is a room with part of the preserved causeway including fossilised trees that are thousands of years old. They are preserved by water, but who knows how much longer they will last? A real slice of living history indeed and a genuine connection to the past. If only we could know what those Bronze Age people were really thinking…

Charlotte Smith
Ely, Cambridgeshire

Zeppelins

I am afraid that this isn’t very fortean but mention of chemtrails [Conspirasphere, **FT460:17**] always reminds me of a story my grandmother used to tell. During the First World War her husband was serving in the Royal Naval Air Service and Nan was living with her parents in Temple Mill Lane, Stratford (her father worked at the GER Works in Stratford). Whenever the Aurora Borealis/Northern Lights were mentioned she always said that during this time there was an aurora display and that people thought it was Zeppelins dropping poison gas. I can see that the greenish colour might trigger the idea of chlorine. I would be interested to know if anyone knows anything about this.

Robert Flood
By email

Giving the piss

Pasadena residents plagued by full bottles of urine regularly deposited at an intersection think it may be the work of an artist [**FT455:16**]. They may be right: artist Gavin Turk recently sold cans of his urine; these were originally sold for £200 each, and are now on sale at £400 each.

Patrick Sheehy
London

LETTERS

The Enfield Poltergeist Show!

Poltergeist rappings

As the author of a book about poltergeists, I was recently contacted c/o my publishers by somebody wishing to publicise the fact that a rap has now been written and produced about the Enfield Poltergeist: so, here I am, obediently doing so, promoting it to its most likely appreciative target audience of forteans.

It is the work of someone describing himself as an "independent researcher (MSc Cognitive Science, PhD Philosophy) and musician" going by the stage-name of Doc Dave Taviner, and his piece "aims to get the essential story [of Enfield] across in an entertaining fun/humorous way". As such, Doc has created an illustrated video laying out the basics of the case via the magic of animation and rhyme. I know vanishingly little about the world of rap music myself, but I can confidently say this is definitely better than at least 99.9 percent of the genre I have ever heard: it's about a poltergeist rather than criminals taking drugs and stabbing one another, for one thing.

His interpretation of what Doc calls "a national British treasure" is laid out here, and gives a simple recap of several of the key incidents and protagonists, for those who were unaware of/had forgotten all about them. Hopefully it will help spread word of the famous haunting even further. 'The Enfield Poltergeist Show' (for such the rap is called) and its accompanying video are on YouTube at: https://youtu.be/EN8mPE3L9is

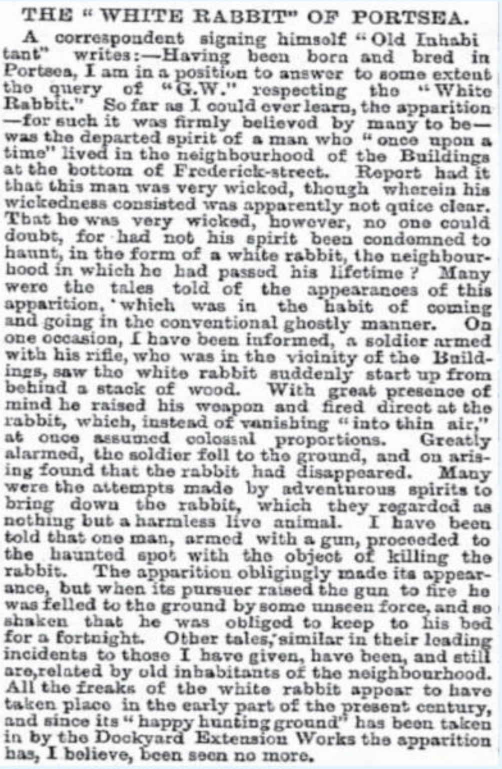
SD Tucker
Widnes, Cheshire

A KERFLUFFLE OVER RABBITS

Phantom rabbits

Simon Young discusses reports of phantom rabbits [**FT462:25**], briefly making reference to a Hampshire newspaper account describing 'the dread white rabbit of Plymouth'. I believe this should be Portsmouth, not Plymouth. Local author Matt Wingette included this story in his compendium of strange tales, *Mysteries of Portsmouth* (Life Is Amazing publications, 2019). In his book he states that the item – which I assume is the same one referred to by Simon – appeared in the *Hampshire Telegraph* on 16 February 1884, and relates to events in Portsea, near Portsmouth Dockyard. Evidently, there were numerous sightings of this 'Pompey Pooka' at the time. With one story describing it being shot at by a soldier and taking on colossal proportions before vanishing!

Nick Maloret
Milton, Hampshire



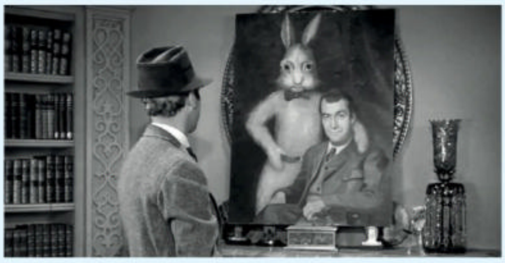
THE "WHITE RABBIT" OF PORTSEA.

A correspondent signing himself "Old Inhabitant" writes:—Having been born and bred in Portsea, I am in a position to answer to some extent the query of "G.W." respecting the "White Rabbit." So far as I could ever learn, the apparition—for such it was firmly believed by many to be—was the departed spirit of a man who "once upon a time" lived in the neighbourhood of the Buildings at the bottom of Frederick-street. Report had it that this man was very wicked, though wherein his wickedness consisted was apparently not quite clear. That he was very wicked, however, no one could doubt, for had not his spirit been condemned to haunt, in the form of a white rabbit, the neighbourhood in which he had passed his lifetime? Many were the tales told of the appearances of this apparition, which was in the habit of coming and going in the conventional ghostly manner. On one occasion, I have been informed, a soldier armed with his rifle, who was in the vicinity of the Buildings, saw the white rabbit suddenly start up from behind a stack of wood. With great presence of mind he raised his weapon and fired direct at the rabbit, which, instead of vanishing "into thin air," at once assumed colossal proportions. Greatly alarmed, the soldier fell to the ground, and on arising found that the rabbit had disappeared. Many were the attempts made by adventurous spirits to bring down the rabbit, which they regarded as nothing but a harmless live animal. I have been told that one man, armed with a gun, proceeded to the haunted spot with the object of killing the rabbit. The apparition obligingly made its appearance, but when its pursuer raised the gun to fire he was felled to the ground by some unseen force, and so shaken that he was obliged to keep to his bed for a fortnight. Other tales, similar in their leading incidents to those I have given, have been, and still are, related by old inhabitants of the neighbourhood. All the freaks of the white rabbit appear to have taken place in the early part of the present century, and since its "happy hunting ground" has been taken in by the Dockyard Extension Works the apparition has, I believe, been seen no more.

Harvey

Regarding the ongoing discussion regarding the Mandela Effect of seeing James Stewart and his invisible rabbit friend at the conclusion of *Harvey* [**FT459:61**], I can confirm that Stewart is quite alone as he departs the mental hospital at the end of the film. However, you do 'see' Harvey at one point in the movie. Much earlier, the character of Elwood Dowd (Stewart) returns home with an oil painting of him and Harvey which he proceeds to prop on the mantelpiece, much to the consternation of his long-suffering sister, played by Josephine Hull.

Dave Taylor by email



TOP RIGHT: A newspaper item concerning the "The 'White Rabbit' of Portsea" from the *Hampshire Telegraph and Naval Chronicle*, 16 Feb 1884. **ABOVE RIGHT:** James Stewart admires a portrait of himself with Harvey the rabbit.

Covent Garden riot

I greatly enjoyed Ian Simmons's article on weird riots [**FT461:46-49**]. My own favourite example (which I've written about in my Substack, Rebel Britannia) started in September 1809 – and lasted until December!

When the theatre at Covent Garden in London was reopened after burning down, ticket prices had risen considerably, to pay for the rebuilding, and the auditorium had been redesigned to give priority to private boxes at the expense of the cheap seats. It was reported that in the new gallery, where the plebs sat, all you could see of the stage was the actors' legs.

This being long before cinema or radio, theatre was, of course, a hugely important and popular entertainment for people of all classes. From the moment on that opening night when actor-manager John Philip Kemble stepped onto the stage he was greeted with hissing, howls of anger, and loud singing. The performance was soon abandoned.

Every night for weeks the "OPs" – supporters of the Old Prices – made it impossible for the show to go on, using pots and pans, musical instruments, parades of banners, mock battles, organised dances on the theatre seats, and speeches defending the immemorial liberties of the freeborn Briton.

JOHN BULL'S JUBILEE
OP
CLIFFORD FOREVER

OP merchandise was seen everywhere in the city: waistcoats, fans, hats, handkerchiefs displayed the rebel initials. As well as OP "inscribed on all the walls of London", according to a visitor from the Continent, "I have heard children hardly yet able to speak amuse themselves by screaming OP."

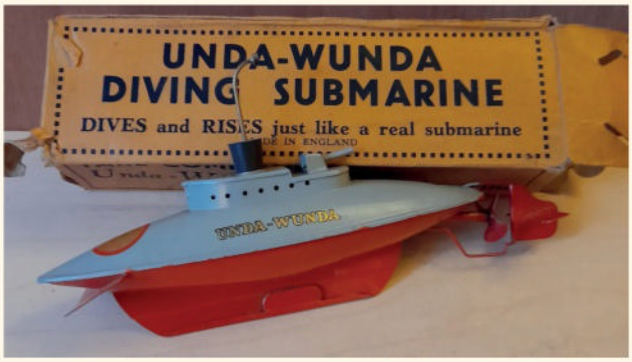
The management made no progress against the protestors, despite hiring famous boxers as bouncers, and eventually Kemble took to the stage to announce that the Old Prices would be reinstated. An OP leader held up a placard reading "We are satisfied", Kemble received a standing ovation, and everyone got back to watching men in tights pretending to be kings.

Mat Coward
Frome, Somerset

David Lynch

It seemed a fitting tribute to the towering genius of surrealist filmmaker David Lynch that his portrait should appear in the *Fortean Times* above that of a Bandicoot. Giant Rabbits featured prominently in his ominous swansong film *Inland Empire*, and to a greater extent in his series *Rabbits*. The most dedicated performance Naomi Watts ever gave was as that bewhiskered interdimensional psychopomp, intoning that she would "find out one day". As do all who bother to watch *Twin Peaks* right through to the end of the third season, feeling a tremendous sense of closure as the conceits resolve into satisfying *verfremdung* effect in the final spooky moments. I was even privileged enough to catch a festival of Lynch's juvenilia at one of the West End's many independent cinemas, including *Five Guys Getting Sick*, *The Amputee* and the exquisitely picaresque animated series *Dumbland*. Anyhow, enough from me on the subject, as I leave the floor open for Bruce McCullough of Canada to give an impassioned recital of his *Ode to Eraserhead* from that post-"Kids in the Hall" era humorous solo album: *Shame-Based Man.*

James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex



Nessie photo

Andy Owens points out the second 1934 'Surgeon's Photograph' of the Loch Ness Monster, shows less neck and a wake [**FT458:65**]. I don't see anything odd here – the head is clearly the same 'Plastic Wood' model. The toy submarine would have been a clockwork 'Sutcliffe' diving submarine: the first model, the 'Unda-Wunder', was produced that year. As Wikipedia says "Sutcliffe Pressings Ltd produced submarines from 1934 up until the factory's closure in 1984. Using clockwork propulsion throughout their production they became popular toys and made Sutcliffe an international brand."

Sutcliffe submarines, by a clever arrangement of their 'planes', surged forwards propelled by their clockwork motors, alternately diving and surfacing. Hence the second photograph has caught the submarine half way through surfacing.

I would postulate a rowing boat just out of frame to the left from which it has been launched.

Roger J Morgan, *London*

Faceless Phantom Females

Rob Gandy's *Weirdness in Warwick* [**FT455:21**] recounts a talk by Alan Murdie who, amongst other things, discussed the alleged ghostly encounter with a 'faceless' phantom female by the landlord of the Low Valley Arms at Wombwell, near Barnsley.

I have a photocopy of the original press report from the *Yorkshire Post* (dated 26 April 2006), written by Emma Dunlop, entitled: "Ghost that Came out of the Closet: Landlord's terror at phantom menace." The newspaper had clearly been quick off the mark as the incident had occurred at 1.30am the previous day (25 April), when landlord Roger Froggatt had searched the premises after the alarms had gone off twice.

On the second occasion, the televisions had switched themselves on, and as his wife Kathryn went to switch them off, Mr Froggatt went to the ladies' toilets and saw the faceless phantom female. He described the figure as having no face, though earlier in the article it read: "When she turned to look at (Mr Froggatt), he saw half her face was missing from her cheekbone down to her jaw."

The article said that police officers attending the scene had seen the toilets flushing by themselves: "They are not automatic, and you have to pull the handle down. There was nobody there." South Yorkshire Police confirmed that their officers had witnessed this event.

There is also the first-hand testimony of an encounter with a faceless phantom female, recounted in the documentary *Ghosts on the Underground.*

Tariq Rhana (I'm not sure of the correct spelling) was a supervisor on the nightshift at Beaconsfield Station, who said: "I just had this strong feeling that there was somebody walking behind me and basically, I turned around and I saw an image of a woman. She had long blonde hair, about halfway down her back, and she had no face; there was just like a blank where the features would be."

The programme mentioned that there was a train crash here (there really was, as I checked it out), and there were 10 fatalities, including four women, although which one of them (if *any* of them) had blonde hair and could therefore have been the possible identity of the ghost, I couldn't discover.

This programme, *Ghosts on the Underground*, is one of the very best (in my opinion) ghost documentaries: originally shown on Channel 5 and now available on DVD and YouTube. For the account mentioned above: fast-forward to 15 minutes and 30 seconds into the running time.

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Meetings with monsters

After reading my article on the Waverley Abbey dragon sightings [**FT451:44-49**] a man called 'Reece' reached out to me about his own sighting that happened some years earlier. He said he saw a dragon in the sky near woods in Grimethorpe, Barnsley in Yorkshire. He was 14 at the time. In his own words:

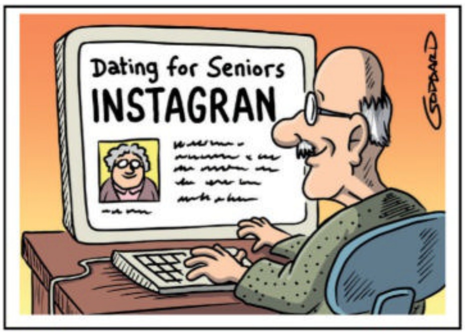
"Monday 13 May 2013. I was just walking home from school this day on a stormy afternoon. I was admiring the storm clouds when I first saw it. The sighting only lasted around 30 to 45 seconds until it disappeared into a storm cloud and I didn't see it again. It was red/brown in colour with yellowish markings, had spikes and horns, bat-like wings and its eyes at the time scared me, as they were glowing yellow. I got quite a bit of detail, as it was flying quite low. This happened in a rural part of Barnsley, UK."

He estimated the wingspan at 20ft (6m) and its height to be at 500ft (152m).

Another witness to a different kind of monster got in touch after reading my book *The Highest Strangeness*. He gave me permission to use his real name in the account. Robin Ellis was walking beside Broomhead Reservoir near Sheffield, Yorkshire, at 10pm on 17 August 2003. An odd feeling made him glance into some woods where a tree trunk had fallen across a stream.

He said that he saw what he described as a "troll" sitting on the log. The figure was black and in its sitting position it was about three feet (90cm) tall. Its legs were in front of it with the knees drawn up. Robin couldn't see arms but felt that they were by the creature's side.

Continued on p.68



CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

In the Huddersfield sky

During the 1960s, I lived on a farm on the outskirts of Huddersfield. One night something happened to a friend and me which we were unable to explain. The farm was at the top of a hill and there were no street lights in the nearby villages which were, in any case, below the horizon. Because of this there was very little light pollution and, on a clear night, the sky was visibly full of stars. During the 1960s we had several winters with prolonged heavy snowfalls. I was sledging on the farm track with our next-door neighbour's son, a lad called Simon. In my mind, it was January or February, cold and clear. It must have been in the mid to late 1960s because Simon's family only moved there in the summer of 1964.

We stood talking outside his house and we were watching the stars, something we often did. I noticed a "star" which was almost twice the size of the largest of the other stars. It was at an angle of about 60 degrees and in the north to north-north-east. It was very unusual and I pointed it out to my friend. It was very bright, and we stared at it for some time because it seemed out-of-place. As we watched, I noticed what can only be described as a tiny pinprick of light, much paler and duller than the "star", that was approaching it horizontally from the left. As it disappeared into the haze surrounding the "star", we continued watching for it. I expected it to emerge and continue its path towards the right. We must have waited about 20 seconds or so for it to reappear and were starting to feel puzzled by this time about what was happening. Then a light appeared and left the "star" from the right, but it came out at an upward angle, perhaps 30 degrees. Again, we watched as it continued its path.

The exact details of what happened next have become fuzzy in my mind in the almost 60 years since it happened, but several of the same pale pin pricks of light started to approach the "star" and several of them left after a period of a few seconds. In each case, the angles varied, and it was difficult to see if the ones coming in were the same as the ones going out. Sometimes, several came out at the same time.

It's difficult to know how long this lasted but perhaps three minutes overall before there were no more small lights visible and there was a pause before, suddenly, the "star" shot out of the sky, diagonally downwards to the left, at tremendous speed towards us, becoming larger until it was about the size of a five-pence piece. It stopped right in front of us and lingered there for perhaps 20 seconds. At this point, for the first time, I felt a little bit anxious because it seemed to me that it might have been aware of us. Then it soared upwards at an angle of about 50 degrees. It reached a point in the sky where it didn't seem to be moving, but just became gradually smaller and paler until it disappeared from view.

> "Suddenly the 'star' shot out of the sky at tremendous speed towards us until it was about the size of a five-pence piece"

At this point, Simon ran inside and told his dad. He must have said he'd seen a UFO because his dad rang the local paper and he then came out and told us no one else had reported seeing a UFO that night.

In common with many people who have seen something they can't explain, I was reluctant to tell other people what had happened, partly for fear of ridicule, but I told my friends and family. We were, of course, children of the Sixties who watched *Doctor Who* and we always described the star as being like a mother ship because it seemed that small craft were continually flying into and out of the larger one.

Over time, other UFO sightings in the area came to light. My sister saw a UFO one morning when waiting for Simon outside his house to walk to school. She knocked on their door and his mum answered. Instead of asking her to come out and look at what was in the sky, she asked for Simon. By the time he came out, it had gone and she has always kicked herself. She described this UFO as being like a threepenny bit but with fewer sides, so perhaps like a 50 pence piece. Another friend saw a UFO one day in the same area. The fields where these sightings took place were close to electricity pylons and the cables crossed the area. I have often wondered if this contributed to our various experiences.

Until last March, I had lost touch with Simon, but our mums used to exchange cards and news at Christmas. After my mum died, I rang Simon's mum one Christmas and, before ending the call, I asked her to ask Simon whether he remembered seeing the UFO. She said he did and often talked about it. She told me about other times Simon had seen a UFO, but her telling of the incidents was quite confused, as I found later from Simon himself.

I had another experience after seeing the UFO but before we left the farm. The bedroom I shared with my sister had two windows, one on either side of the room. I awoke one night and looked out of the window to my right to see a saucer-shaped craft moving very slowly from the south. I lay watching it, willing myself to wake my sister or get up and watch to see where it went, but I just lay there, not exactly paralysed because I didn't try to move, but perhaps fearful of what I might see. Over the years, I convinced myself that this was actually a dream, but I do sometimes wonder.

During the late 1970s or early 1980s, a newspaper, possibly the *Daily Express*, was conducting a survey and had asked people to write in if they had seen a UFO. I wrote a letter recounting our experience but heard no more so I've no idea what came of it. I'd be interested to know if anyone else remembers this.

Fast forward 45 years or so and I was working in a local junior school. The head of Science had arranged for someone to visit school with a night-sky projector. The projector was in a domed tent and the children lay on their backs and the expert told them about the stars and he mentioned that he had worked at NASA. He ate his lunch in the staff room and then went out to get ready for the afternoon session. It appeared to me that, if anyone had, he may perhaps have an explanation for our sighting. I was wary of approaching him but asked if I could run something past him and he said absolutely, yes. I recounted the above experience and he listened politely without interrupting, more than most people had done. When I finished, he thought for a moment and then said he thought he had an explanation. Strangely, I felt happy because, even though I had spent most of my life believing that I'd had a special experience, I was open to it being straightforward. This is what he said:

During the 1960s, the Airforce were able to re-fuel planes in mid-air and what I had described sounded exactly like this. At that point, I felt as if a weight had been lifted, but then he said that, as for the part at the end where the thing shot across the sky, stopped in front of us, and then shot away, there was absolutely no explanation that he could think of.

Since then, I've had about 10 years to think about this and I no longer feel that it explains what we saw. Nowadays, a tanker can re-fuel more than one plane at a time, but this was the 1960s and I don't think it was possible then – but I'm happy to be corrected. In addition, the light we saw was stationary, not moving.

I don't know what we saw but I don't think we watched aircraft being re-fuelled.

In March 2022, I noticed a post from Simon on a local Facebook page and decided to message him. Simon said that his memories of the night were very sketchy; mine, on the other hand, were so vivid that I could imagine it was happening to me again every time I thought about it.

Simon thought, for example, that my sister had been there but she wasn't. His memory:

"The event we saw lasted about five minutes and was a series of flying objects glinting in the dark zooming around the sky in varied orbits. I went inside to get my parents, and as I returned the objects converged and disappeared into a much larger object which hadn't been moving. The larger object then shot off at an incredible speed – think warp drive – until it was out of sight. My parents didn't see anything – I suppose it was all over by the time they came out.

"That's about all I can remember.

"The 'other' incident for me was when I was walking, alone, to school one morning.

I saw a formation in the sky slightly behind me, so south, of probably seven diamond-shaped objects. It's hard to say what size or at what altitude they were, but they were almost hovering – certainly any conventional early Sixties aircraft would have stalled at that speed. They were closely grouped into a larger diamond formation and stayed like that for a minute or so before gently peeling off and individually picking up speed as they disappeared in different directions – a bit like a Red Arrows manœuvre. Then they were gone."

I do find it strange that our recollections of that night vary so much; for me it was a very real experience, the most vivid memory of my childhood, and very special. My sister tells me that my description of that night has never changed.

Nine months after Simon and I shared messages, he sadly passed away and now I am the only witness to what happened that cold winter's evening.

Linda Marsden
By email

" I felt the car crumple and then it somersaulted several times in the air" eral times in the air"

Dream crash

I had a really vivid dream in the early morning of 31 July 2025.

I dreamt that I was driving my car along a local urban road during the daytime and was going really fast. I lost control and went sideways into a grass-covered bank on the right-hand side of a left bend in the road. I recognised exactly where the bend is in real life except that there are houses there now. I felt the car crumple and then it somersaulted several times in the air. I must have been flung out; as the next thing I know is that I am lying on my right side and looking back up the road with my head on the tarmac.

I then awoke with a start and said to myself, "What a bloody horrible dream, what was that all about?". That is the first time I had dreamt something of this nature and thought it quite odd, as I never drive like that.

Later on the same day, I took some scrap metal into a local scrap yard to be weighed in. I parked with my wheels on full lock and the front wheels sticking out. I looked at the tread on both wheels. I was shocked by what I saw. On one (nearside) wheel, there was a split that ran halfway around the tyre and running along the tread. The split was big enough to get a £1 coin in but strangely enough, the tyre was still inflated. The other tyre showed several 'cracks' across the tread. The main split would certainly have caused a major blow-out if at speed. Straight away, I went to a nearby tyre fitting place and had two new tyres on.

It was only much later that I recalled the dream I had the night before. Was the dream an omen or a warning? Seems too coincidental to me.

Ivan Braddow
Kirkby-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire

Fairy sighting?

I'm 22 years old. This happened to my mum Nikki and I on one of our late-night drives looking for shooting stars. We would go close to where we kept our horses in the countryside, surrounded by nothing but fields. On one of the many quiet roads with nothing but bushes and fields, we would watch the dark roads on our drive back home.

Four or five years ago we saw a faint orange/reddish light that appeared to be the shape of a fairy-like figure skipping across the road and vanishing into one of the bushes. We were stunned for a good minute and then said Oh my God, did you see that!'?

It never entered our minds to write about it because we didn't want to look mad. But we thought we should share it with FT readers.

Halle Tennie
By email

Now you see them?

At the end of a vexing four-hour car journey I was stopped at temporary lights half a mile from home. Behind me I saw in my mirror the next-door neighbour and his dad. Both are very distinctive as they have blue tattoos on their faces and half-shaved heads! It was definitely the son's car – a blue mini, but the dad was driving. I waved but he didn't see me.

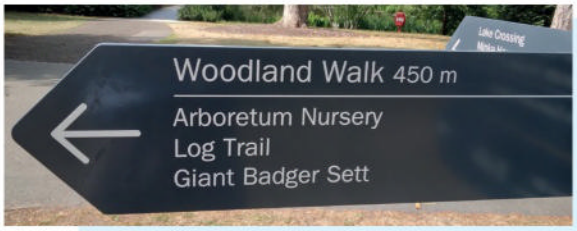
The lights changed and I did not look behind again until we got to our turning. They were not there. I drove the short way up the bank to where our terrace is and there was the blue mini parked and no sign of either man.

There are no possible turn-offs, no overtaking possibilities and if he had overtaken me he would have had to be going like the wind to get home, park, walk up the terrace and into his house. I just don't know what to make if it. We smile and say hello when we see each other but I am not sure I know him well enough to tell him about this and see what he thinks of it.

It is definitely 'One of Those Things'. Things that are actually completely impossible, but because there is no contextual significance and we can't figure them out we are more than usually likely to forget all about them.

Liz Kirsopp
Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

LETTERS



Giant badgers

I thought that I should alert you to the fact that a certain cryptid has been hiding in plain sight in London's Kew Gardens! This is the Giant Badger!

There is clear evidence (see my photo) that these creatures have built a sett within its grounds. Badgers only grow to around a foot in height so how big a giant badger might be, and how many of them there are, has yet to be determined. I contacted Richard Freeman while I was at Kew Gardens and assume that he is already on the case!

Rob Gandy *by email*

We at the Centre for Fortean Zoology have been on the trail of these giant badgers in Kew for some time now. Evidence points to them being descendants of *Megalictis fexrox*, a jaguar-sized mustelid of Miocene North America with bone-crushing jaws. It seems that in the last 19 million years they have evolved to Kodiak bear sized predators that burrow through the loam beneath Richmond-upon-Thames and on moonless nights emerge to batten on the upper classes: tweed, lack of a chin and the killing of animals for fun are all things they look for in their prey. The smell of champagne and caviar sends them into a feeding frenzy, as does the taste of blue blood. We propose the scientific binomial *Meles colossicus* for this species and encourage its breeding in large numbers.

Richard Freeman
by email

Continued from p.65

It seemed to have long, pointed ears and a bald head, but he could make out no facial features. Despite this he felt that the thing was staring at him. The troll seemed to be covered in a white slime that shone and seemed to be drawn into its body as he watched. He felt that this may have been "ectoplasm".

The pair gazed at each other for two to three minutes, but when Robin left the path to get closer the creature "blinked out of existence".

Ten years ago Robin had another odd experience. He was staying at his sister's holiday home in Trefor, on the Llyn Peninsula, in Gwynedd, Wales. At night he was awoken by something dragging furniture around and ripping posters off the wall at 3am.

The following night he says the poltergeist entered his dreams and gave him nightmares. He told me this was like coming out of the shower and meeting a filthy old tramp who shoved dog poo in your mouth! He mentally combated this the next night by visualising the nightmares on a cinema screen and turning them into a film he was watching in his dream. The poltergeist never bothered him again.

Richard Freeman
Zoological Director, Centre for Fortean Zoology, Exeter

It's Not Unusual

I was amused by Barry Cross's 'Ticket Story' [**FT458:66**], where he described family members disparately getting hold of tickets for Wolf Alice concerts and then finding that they were all sat together in adjacent seats at the same concert. By pure coincidence, I had an article appear in ASSAP's Issue 162 of its *Seriously Strange* magazine (p.30), which was published at the same time as FT458. I titled it 'Just The Ticket!'. And, yes, this was about people disparately getting hold of gig tickets and amazingly finding themselves sat next to each other!

Last year, my good fortean friend David Adams told me about his friend getting tickets for a Paul McCartney concert in Liverpool in 2003, including random purchases off eBay sellers in Cardiff and Manchester, and finding that all four family members ended up sitting in adjacent seats. I then recounted my own story of purchasing two separate 'returns' tickets weeks apart for an Eddie Izzard concert in Manchester many years ago. One was for my eldest son and one was for me. To our surprise and delight we sat next to each other. (I will ignore the coincidence that David and I share the same birthday with Eddie Izzard).

Towards the end of Barry Cross's story he reasonably asks "What were the odds on that happening?" Given my article, it would appear that the odds on such a ticket coincidence occurring are not as long as he was thinking. Indeed, for Tom Jones concerts "It's Not Unusual".

Rob Gandy
By email

Spontaneous human combustion

Reading the articles by Larry Arnold on spontaneous human combustion sent me to my file of material from the late Andrew Davie, knowing that he had an interest in the subject. I found a short paper by him, self-published and dated 1996, entitled "Research into the causes of spontaneous combustion and human spontaneous combustion". It is only a couple of pages and mentions no case history, but contains this intriguing paragraph:

"In regard to Human Spontaneous Combustion, an ancient manuscript from the Korean Temples, circa 500 BC., written in a form of Japanese hieroglyphics which is no longer known in academia, was decoded by special techniques. This manuscript was found to contain an accurate description of the horrific deaths, and an explanation of the causative energies in the phenomena of human spontaneous combustion, The formula differed from normal aspect of ignition of friable materials, in as much as the parameters of Newton's, and Abercorn's formulas to encompass living to encompass living biological matter." [sic throughout]

ForteanTimes
SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION
THE LIVERPOOL LEPRECHAUN HUNT

I pass this on for what it is worth (probably not very much).

Roger Musson
Edinburgh

Having just read Larry E Arnold's excellent articles on Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC), it occurred to me to wonder about some corollaries – like what about other parts of the world and other species?

Other countries are explicable in part by different cultures – widespread belief in witchcraft, for instance, but most of Western Europe is comparable to the US. I have read books concerning British cases, and there should be cases in other languages.

What about other species? There must be similar numbers of dogs to humans in the UK and US. Are dogs occasionally found similarly burned? As they live very closely with us, there should be at least one or two cases of Fido burning in his basket, or more noticeably, in his mistress's bed!

Perhaps the absence of clothes? I don't recall any cases of a victim being found naked, but the phenomenon is so rare it could be overlooked. Surely such cases would attract the notice of our legacy press – I'm sure they could work in a global warming angle somehow!

We should keep an open mind on such things, no matter how uncomfortable. If we found out the mechanism, at the very least it would save a fortune in cremation!

Jerry Monk
Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex

Fascinating read about SHC by Larry E Arnold. Wondered if there have been any occurrences in the animal kingdom, granted it could be very difficult to verify. Also wondered if white phosphorus has been investigated. Although from my limited read it seems a very large quantity would have to be used.

Does seem odd that it only occurs in a solitary environment. Did wonder what the victims' habits were. Were they doing some kind of experiment on themselves?

James Wilkins
Southampton, Hampshire

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

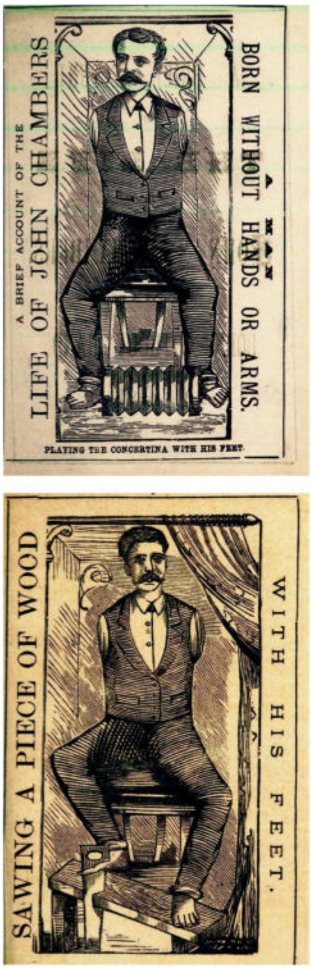
JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past recalls the career of a freakshow performer who proved surprisingly handy with his feet

SVERIGE
5
ÖRE ÖRE

56. THE ARMLESS CARPENTER

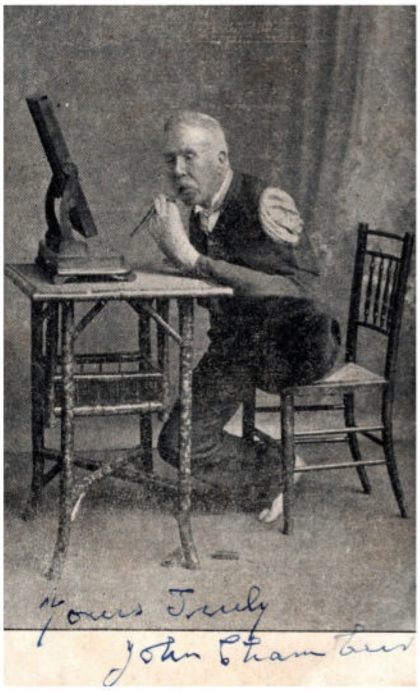
George Edward Thomas was born in June 1850, the second of six sons of the London tea merchant Richard Thomas and his wife Anne. While all his brothers had the normal complement of extremities, George Edward was born without arms. On each side, the glenoid cavity and the acromion could be plainly felt, but there was not even the most rudimentary trace of a humerus. His mother could remember that in the sixth week of her pregnancy, she had seen a child with no arms walking down the Minories, being horrified at the sight. A gullible medical practitioner, Dr R Davies MCRS, of Brunswick Place, City Road, was very much impressed by this singular instance of a 'maternal impression': he wrote to the *Lancet* to report the case, urging that unless armless children were forced to dress properly and cover up their deformities, London would soon be full of similar monstrosities, caused by the diseased imagination of pregnant women!

As a boy, George Edward Thomas developed great dexterity with his feet, using them as naturally as other children use their hands. Since his parents were keen that he should have a good education, they placed him in a large London public school, where he enjoyed success in his studies and became a useful footballer, although playing cricket was of course too much for him. At some stage, he also received some degree of training in carpentry. At the age of 18, he took to the stage, calling himself 'John Chambers, the Armless Carpenter', and impressing the freakshow visitors by performing various tricks with his feet. His manager was Tom Norman, whose other clients would include Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. Although depicted as a villain in the film about the Elephant Man, Norman was in reality an honest man and a good freak show impresario. He had a pamphlet printed giving *A Brief Account of the Life of John Chambers, a Man born without Hands and Arms;* like all Victorian freak show ephemera, it is rare today. He also printed at least three picture postcards of the armless wonder, which could be signed by him for an extra fee after the show; one of them has a brief text in German advertising "der armlose Zimmermann", indicating that he had toured abroad.


A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE
LIFE OF JOHN CHAMBERS
BORN WITHOUT HANDS OR ARMS.
A MAN
PLAYING THE CONCERTINA WITH HIS FEET
SAWING A PIECE OF WOOD
WITH HIS FEET.

He impressed visitors by performing tricks with his feet

LEFT: Two images of 'John Chambers' performing, from Tom Norman's pamphlet about him. **BELOW**: A postcard showing Chambers, with a pediscripted autograph by the armless wonder.



In 1872, George Edward Thomas married Sarah Ann Endersby, having "no difficulty in placing the ring on the lady's finger with his toes". They lived happily together and went on to have several children. After her death in 1894, George remarried Elizabeth McColl Shannon in 1898 and fathered numerous children; in total, he had 14 living children with his two wives. Upon retirement from show business, he opened a tobacconist's shop in London, which he ran until reaching retirement age, when he left it to his daughters.

The Armless Carpenter lived on for several more years, at 23 Asylum Road, Camberwell. In June 1929, he fell ill with breathing difficulties and was taken to a nursing home at 48 Constance Road, where he died on 11 June from senility and pulmonary congestion according to his death certificate. He was survived by his wife Elizabeth and by his numerous brood of children.

In 2009, a man named David Ball was interviewed by the *Croydon Guardian*, claiming to be a descendant of the Armless Carpenter, expressing amazement that after researching his family tree, he could find no descendant of his great-grandfather who suffered from the same deformity. In reality, this is not amazing, since 'bilateral Amelia', or the congenital absence of both upper extremities, is a sporadic event caused by a disruption in foetal development, without any hereditary component.

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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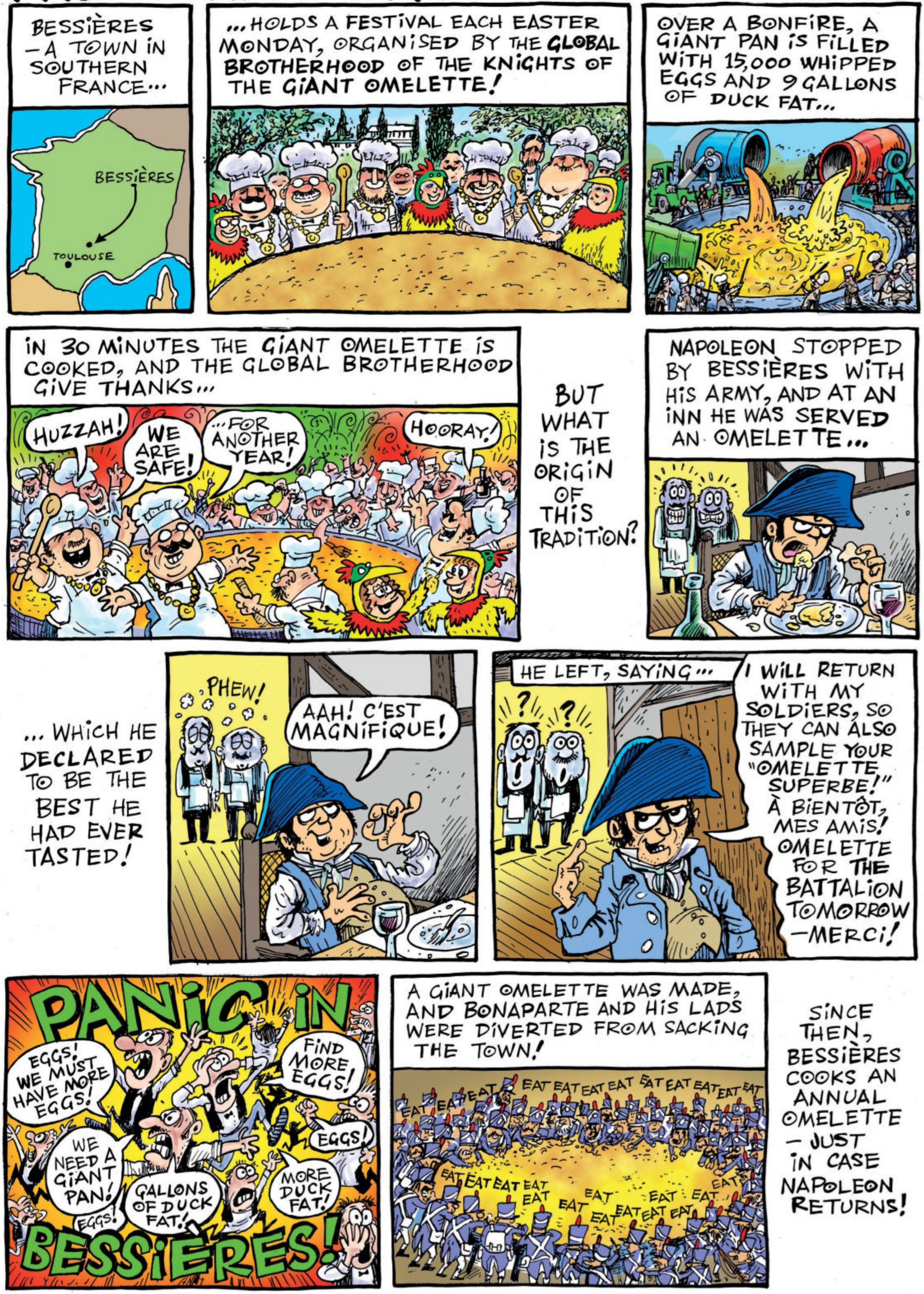
PHENOMENOMIX

GIANT OMELETTE

HUNT EMERSON with Rob Gandy


BESSIÈRES – A TOWN IN SOUTHERN FRANCE...
BESSIÈRES
TOULOUSE
...HOLDS A FESTIVAL EACH EASTER MONDAY, ORGANISED BY THE GLOBAL BROTHERHOOD OF THE KNIGHTS OF THE GIANT OMELETTE!
OVER A BONFIRE, A GIANT PAN IS FILLED WITH 15,000 WHIPPED EGGS AND 9 GALLONS OF DUCK FAT...
IN 30 MINUTES THE GIANT OMELETTE IS COOKED, AND THE GLOBAL BROTHERHOOD GIVE THANKS...
HUZZAH!
WE ARE SAFE!
...FOR ANOTHER YEAR!
HOORAY!
BUT WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THIS TRADITION?
NAPOLEON STOPPED BY BESSIÈRES WITH HIS ARMY, AND AT AN INN HE WAS SERVED AN OMELETTE...
... WHICH HE DECLARED TO BE THE BEST HE HAD EVER TASTED!
PHEW!
AAH! C'EST MAGNIFIQUE!
HE LEFT, SAYING...
I WILL RETURN WITH MY SOLDIERS, SO THEY CAN ALSO SAMPLE YOUR "OMELETTE SUPERBE!" À BIENTÔT, MES AMIS! OMELETTE FOR THE BATTALION TOMORROW – MERCI!
PANIC IN BESSIÈRES!
EGGS! WE MUST HAVE MORE EGGS!
FIND MORE EGGS!
EGGS!
WE NEED A GIANT PAN!
EGGS!
GALLONS OF DUCK FAT!
MORE DUCK FAT!
A GIANT OMELETTE WAS MADE, AND BONAPARTE AND HIS LADS WERE DIVERTED FROM SACKING THE TOWN!
EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT
EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT
SINCE THEN, BESSIÈRES COOKS AN ANNUAL OMELETTE – JUST IN CASE NAPOLEON RETURNS!

COMING
NEXT MONTH

A CHRISTMAS HAUNTING

THE SOUTH SHIELDS POLTERGEIST: 20 YEARS ON

FORGOTTEN FOLKLORE

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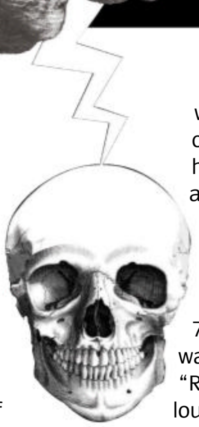
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 465
ON SALE 27 NOV 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



After Adrienne Jones-McAllister had completed the MRI scan she was having for a knee problem, she called her husband, Keith, 61, into the MRI room to help her get off the table. Usually, anyone entering the scanner room is required to remove all metal from their person due to the danger from the massively powerful magnets, but as he had not initially intended to go into the room, Keith had not taken off the 20lb weight training chain he was wearing round his neck. As he entered, the powerful magnetic field grabbed the chain and slammed Keith violently into the side of the machine, trapping him there. "I said: 'Could you turn off the machine, call 911, do something, Turn this damn thing off!'" Adrienne recalled. With the technician's help she tried to pull Keith free of the machine, but the force was too strong. "He waved goodbye to me and then his whole body went limp," she said. Once the machine could be turned off, Keith was freed, but died of a heart attack. *[AP] 19 Jul 2025.*

A 20-year-old woman travelling on a bus from Foz do Iguaçu to São Paulo in Brazil fell ill and needed treatment by medics when it stopped at a restaurant in Guarupuava. The woman was initially found to be suffering from shortness of breath, but then had what is described as "a post-seizure seizure" and experienced serious respiratory distress, which led to her heart stopping. Medics attempted to revive the woman for 45 minutes, but were unsuccessful and she was pronounced dead at the scene. During resuscitation attempts, though, numerous packages were discovered glued to her body; these were found to contain 26 iPhones, which were impounded by police. It was not immediately clear what had caused the woman's death, although no drugs were found on the body, and police were awaiting the results of forensic tests. *mirror.co.uk, 31 Jul 2025.*

After a party in Venda Nova do Imigrante in south-eastern Brazil, Adriana Ribeiro, 42, and her boyfriend Marcone Cardoso, 26, were seized with lust on the way home and pulled off the road for some al fresco sex. They stopped at a local scenic location – a cliff with a 396 metre (1,300ft) drop popular with hang gliders – stripped, and gave in to their passions. While they were in flagrante, though, the car plummeted over the cliff. It hit a rock 100m (328ft) down and ejected the couple's naked bodies, killing them instantly, before crashing into thick woods on the private estate beneath. The car was not found until 7am the next morning, when it was discovered by a caretaker. "Residents reported hearing a loud noise between 1:30am and 2am, but because it was dark and the vegetation was thick, no one saw anything at the time," explained a police spokesperson. "There were no signs of violence at the scene or on the bodies, and the car's handbrake was engaged" and investigators believed that the couple's rocking had edged the car towards, and finally over, the cliff, throwing them to their deaths. *mirror.co.uk, 8 Aug 2025.*

Hitoshi Nikaidoh, 35, a doctor at St Joseph Hospital in Houston, Texas, was stepping into a lift when the doors suddenly closed and, rather than immediately opening again, they pinned him in the doorway by his shoulders. The lift then moved upwards, severing Nikaidoh's head before immediately coming to a halt between floors, trapping another hospital employee inside with her colleague's decapitated body until firefighters could extract her. An investigation into the incident discovered that the lift had been poorly maintained and was overdue for an annual inspection, and that a misconnected wire had prevented the lift sensors from detecting someone stuck in the doors. Despite Nikaidoh's gruesome end, lifts remain far safer to use than stairs; you are many times more likely to die from slipping and falling on stairs than you are through a lift malfunction. *msn.com, 30 Jul 2025.*

Sunjay Kapur, 53, billionaire owner of global car parts company Sona Comstar and a close friend of Prince William, died after swallowing a bee during a polo match in England. The bee stung him inside the throat, triggering anaphylactic shock and leading to a massive heart attack that killed him. One of Kapur's last social media posts before his death read: "Your time on Earth is limited. Leave the 'what ifs' to the philosophers and instead dive headfirst into the 'why nots'." *express.co.uk, 13 Jun 2025.*

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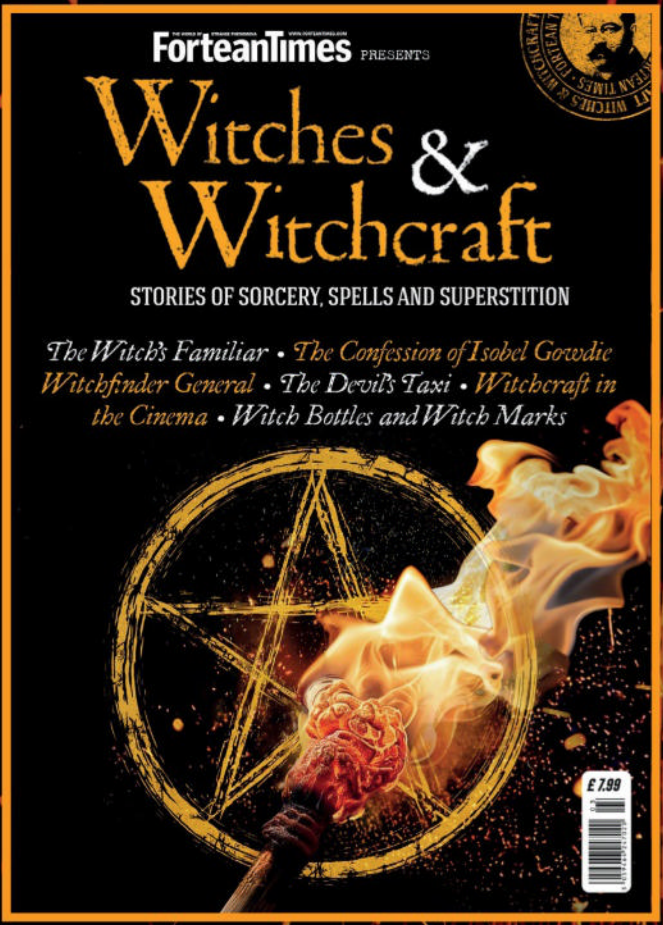

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